Table of Contents

1. ☾ T I D E C L A N
2. ☾ W A V E C L A N
3. ☾ T E R R I T O R Y
4. □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□
5. ᯓ prologue
6. ᯓ one
7. ᯓ two
8. ᯓ three
9. ᯓ four
10. ᯓ five
11. ᯓ six
12. ᯓ seven
13. ᯓ eight
14. ᯓ nine
15. ᯓ ten
16. ᯓ eleven
17. ᯓ twelve
18. ᯓ thirteen
19. ᯓ fourteen
20. ᯓ fifteen
21. ᯓ sixteen
22. ᯓ seventeen
23. ᯓ eighteen
24. ᯓ nineteen
25. ᯓ twenty
26. ᯓ twenty-one
27. ᯓ epilogue
28. □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□
29. ☾ T R I V I A

☾ T I D E C L A N

[image]

L E A D E R

almondstar ☙ *large she-cat with long, creamy white and russet fur. her large eyes are a vibrant shade of cyan.*
apprentice: burnetpaw

D E P U T Y

rainflight ☙ *dark gray, long-legged tom with golden-flecked green eyes.*
apprentice: bluepaw

M E D I C I N E C A T

sandfire ☙ *beige tom with streaks of mixed white and sea green eyes.*

M E D I C I N E C A T A P P R E N T I C E

fawnpaw ☙ *tiny she-cat with pale brown fur coupled with small dapples of white. she has a slender tail and bright green eyes.*

W A R R I O R S

heronstrike ☙ *broad shouldered, muscular tom with feathery gray fur, a white underbelly, and muted yellow eyes.*
apprentice: milkpaw

covestorm ☙ *handsome, dark smoke tabby with a gray base and blended black stripes. he has captivating orange eyes flecked with bits of*

gold.
apprentice: brinepaw

cedarfrost ᯓ *huge tom with flowing, chestnut brown fur. his tail, chest and underbelly are white and his large eyes are a faded blue-gray.*

sagecloud ᯓ *long-haired she-cat with a mottled tawny pelt and glittering hazel eyes.*

fleetwater ᯓ *smokey black tom with tufted fur and light amber eyes.*

robindust ᯓ *russet she-cat with black and gray streaks gracefully swept across her pelt. her eyes are an entrancing forest green.*
apprentice: bunnypaw

skymask ᯓ *a lilac-point siamese she-cat with soft, baby-blue eyes.*

sunclaw ᯓ *golden tabby tom with a white legs, chest and underbelly. his fur is short but soft and and his eyes are a mellow green.*

baycrash ᯓ *lean, dove-gray tabby she-cat with large ears and hazel eyes.*

A P P R E N T I C E S

bluepaw ᯓ *small, blue-gray tomcat with tiny paws and olive green eyes.*

brinepaw ᯓ *soft-furred apprentice with mottled hickory markings and sharp bronze eyes.*

burnetpaw ᯓ *a dark, russet red tom with tabby markings that grow more pronounced on his face. he has long, fluffy fur, a cream white chest, and his eyes are a bright, mixed hazel.*

milkpaw ᯓ *fluffy, pure white she-cat with a plumed tail and sky blue eyes.*

bunnypaw ᯓ *short-haired she-cat with a white and gray dappled pelt. her eyes are a gentle blue.*

Q U E E N S & K I T S

dawnwind *golden tabby she-cat with white forelegs and a plumed tail. her green eyes are mixed with a honey-colored amber.*
kits: aspenkit, beechkit, heatherkit

fogspirit *ash-gray, marble tabby she-cat with short legs and dark brown eyes.*
kits: minnowkit

E L D E R S

cliffleap *light gray tabby tom with a darker tipped tail. his eyes are a bright, daisy yellow.*

jayberry *solid blue and gray she-cat with short fur and pale, mint-green eyes.*

F A M I L Y T R E E

☾ W A V E C L A N

[image]

L E A D E R

adderstar ᯓ *lean, brown tabby tom with red undertones and bright amber eyes.*

D E P U T Y

duskwing ᯓ *ash brown tom with darker brown markings strewn across his body that blend into his chocolate colored paws. his eyes are golden like the sun.*
apprentice: nightpaw

M E D I C I N E C A T

cypressfern ᯓ *a large, long-furred she-cat with emerald green eyes. her pelt is patterned beautifully by brown and golden bengal spotting and her left foreleg is crippled.*

M E D I C I N E C A T A P P R E N T I C E

lemonpaw ᯓ *sandy colored she-cat with large paws and inquisitive yellow eyes.*

W A R R I O R S

tigershade ᯓ *a powerful, broad shouldered she-cat with a red tabby pelt, black forepaws, and pale yellow eyes.*

finchblaze ꕥ *ginger tabby she-cat with black stripes and sharp amber eyes.*

coralstep ꕥ *fluffy white and beige tom with gray-blue eyes.*

whitefin ꕥ *a sturdy, white and gray mottled tabby she-cat with faded beige markings. she has ice-blue eyes.*
apprentice: plumpaw

cloverflight ꕥ *mottled white and gray tabby with smudged tan coloring splattered across her pelt. her eyes are a deep ocean blue.*
apprentice: lilypaw

daisybee ꕥ *small, tortoiseshell she-cat with thick fur and oat-brown eyes.*
apprentice: lavenderpaw

rainpetal ꕥ *dark gray tabby she-cat with soft brown eyes touched with a hint of mint green.*

oakstream ꕥ *handsome tom with long, pale amber fur, white markings, and knowing green eyes.*

brambleshadow ꕥ *dark brown tom with tabby stripes and inky brown eyes.*
apprentice: ryepaw

aquastone ꕥ *lithe, blue-gray tom with white paws and round hazel eyes.*

A P P R E N T I C E S

nightpaw ꕥ *black tabby tom with hazel eyes and a long, plumed tail.*

plumpaw ꕥ *light gray tom with feathery soft fur and hazel eyes.*

lavenderpaw ꕥ *light gray she-cat with amber eyes and a long, fluffy tail.*

lilypaw ꕥ *amber tabby she-cat with cream white paws and a white*

muzzle. her eyes are a soft olive green.

ryepaw *golden tabby tom with white toes. he has bright green eyes.*

QUEENS & KITS

blacksnake *jet black she-cat with silky fur and and a slender form. she has vibrant hazel eyes.*
kits: slatekit, birdkit

ELDERS

oatmoth *fawn-colored she-cat with a white tipped tail. her eyes are a rich amber.*

sparknettle *flaming ginger tom with tufted fur and striking hazel eyes.*

FAMILY TREE

☾ T E R R I T O R Y

[image]

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

[image]

waves, tides, foam, brine.
rolling, roaring, gushing, soaring.

welcome to the world of **OCEAN MOON.**

prologue

When I became self-aware, I realized how very hot it was. It was sweltering. Why hadn't I noticed before? Why was I even conscious? I was thoroughly confused and I was afraid.

One inch at a time, I meandered through the orange sea that encased me, stretching out to reach some safe place. Burning pain seared through me as I struggled back and forth, thrashing about in a pathetic attempt at swimming. Ever so slowly, I crawled my way upwards. Something began to appear ahead of me. Some new color I'd never seen before.

It was a lighter color than the hues of orange and brown I was used to. It reminded me of the sense of wonder I'd felt upon waking up.

Soon I was approaching the top of the orange sea. The originally scalding temperature had begun to taper off. I had the strange sense that I had become somebody. Then, suddenly, I was bobbing at the surface of the orange sea. Then I was reaching out for the vast spread of color that blossomed overhead. There was a quiet moment at the top where I experienced happiness for the first time.

I felt a searing sensation as I touched the space above the sea.

My entire being followed and I withdrew from the broiling waves.

Slowly lifted.

Slowly lifted.

Surrounded by cool air.

The pain I had felt before ceased. Now I was moving again. Beneath me, the glowing orange sea grew very small. Images of lush green treetops and open sandy beaches whizzed by as I flew. The unfamiliar color appeared again, although this time it was beneath me. There were waves below, like the ones from my home, but

these waves rolled with more strength and certainty.

Words began to appear in my mind.

Blue.

Ocean.

Water.

What a wonderful world it was! What a wonderful world I had discovered! What beauty and mystery awaited just above the surface of the orange sea!

Out here, there was air. Out here, there was space to *breathe*. There was sunlight, and there was rushing, gushing, flowing water. Oh! The water! Such miraculous, indescribable water.

As I was thinking and wondering and rethinking about the water, my pace slowed and I suddenly came to a stop midair. I began to fall. But, in my euphoric state, I did not find this at all alarming. I enjoyed the feeling of the wind and the speed as I went, and my mood was not shaken even as I came crashing to the ground.

Now I was on the ground! Suddenly there was dirt and stone and grass and flowers! I was ecstatic. I was an explorer of both sky and earth.

But then I began feeling strange. And soon I was very sick, and I fell to the ground writhing. The acrid smell of the soil surrounded my body and I retched.

My... body?

My body!

What a wonderful world indeed!

one

Golden rays of sun shone through the breaks in the feathery clouds to the ocean's surface. The sputtering navy waves scattered the light in every direction. White foam exploded against the shore, before falling away again into the sea. Mottled gray seagulls swirled above the water and over the beach, squawking as they stretched their impressive wingspans to glide along the newleaf breeze.

The sunlight glittered on the dark blue swells, broken into thousands of individual fragments. On the warm beach, Brinepaw sat with his ears tucked against his head and his rich bronze eyes squinting through the wind. His gaze rested on the enormous expanse of water before him and his fluffy, plumed tail twitched back and forth on the sand.

Brinepaw watched as a seagull dove from high in the air, swooping down moments later to retrieve a glossy silver fish from the surface of the waves. Its large wings flapped loudly with the effort of taking off again, and Brinepaw lifted his chin to follow the bird as it flew towards the horizon.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Brinepaw jumped to his paws, his blended, brown and black fur fluffing up in surprise. He spun around to see a dark furred tom standing several paces away. "Covestorm!"

The smoke tabby said nothing as he sauntered up alongside Brinepaw and sat down. His vibrant orange eyes shone with intrigue and his thick fur was pulled toward the sea on a passing, salt-laced breeze.

"What is it? Is something wrong?" Despite Covestorm's calm demeanor, Brinepaw remained standing with his muscles tensed.

"Of course not," Covestorm purred deeply, his eyes fixed on the ocean tides. "But when you failed to attend our joint training

session with Heronstrike and Milkpaw, I figured you'd gone off someplace to think."

"So you came here?" Brinepaw cocked his small, triangular head to one side.

The large tabby's eyes were vacant, yet strangely thoughtful. "Yes," he murmured, flicking Brinepaw's side with his long tail, "I know you well, Brinepaw."

"I guess so," the large apprentice agreed, sitting down again and coiling his tail around his russet-colored forepaws.

There was a quiet moment between them. Brinepaw could hear his mentor's soft breathing under the louder sound of waves breaking against the beach. Huge clouds floated across the cerulean sky, their round figures accented by an outline of amber sunlight. He could feel his feet pressing paw-prints into the sun-warmed sand, and the sharp scent of salty waves was carried to his nose as the wind picked up once again.

"It's not been this warm in quite some time," Covestorm commented.

"You're right," Brinepaw murmured, watching his toes as he pressed them deeper into the sand, "I'm so relieved leafbare is over." Brinepaw shuddered as he remembered the frigid winds that had blown off the ocean, and how those winds had brought horrible sickness and hunger to his clan. They had been fortunate not to lose any cats. *Will we be so lucky next leafbare?* Brinepaw wondered sullenly.

He nearly jumped out of his fur when he felt Covestorm rest a paw on his shoulder. "Are you okay?" questioned the tom, his orange irises ripe with concern.

Brinepaw clenched his teeth together and sank away from his mentor's touch, "Yes, I'm fine. Let's just get back to camp."

Covestorm's whole body deflated as he let out a long sigh. Brinepaw turned and began padding along the edge of the water, his tail dragging along the ground as he went. There were several seconds

of dreadful silence, but then Brinepaw could hear the gentle slopping of Covestorm's paws as he followed behind.

The walk back to camp was gray and subdued. Brinepaw could see that the faraway clouds had morphed into huge monsters, their bellies swollen with rain. The wind was humid, and Brinepaw could taste the promise of a storm that hung in the air. The gentle lapping of the ocean intensified until Brinepaw could feel flecks of water fly onto his pelt each time a wave met the shoreline.

"Hurry," Covestorm called from behind him, "There's a storm brewing!"

His words were swallowed up by the loud moan of wind that swept across the sea and over the beach. Brinepaw was nearly blown off his paws.

It was like he'd woken up. Brinepaw felt his muscles tighten with anticipation and his breath quicken. A pang of alarm shot down his spine.

The entire sky was dark except for the distant horizon, where dozens of flashes of lightning danced over the water. A boom of thunder pounded across the ocean to where Brinepaw and Covestorm traveled. Brinepaw's ears flattened to his skull as he took of running. He felt his fur being pulled by the strong wind and his paws tingled with the sensation of genuine fear.

The lightning was white, then it shifted to become a vibrant and terrifying purple. The thunder grew into a wailing that resembled the sound of battle. Soon, sheets of icy cold rain fell from the darkened sky and washed over the land. The feeling of certain doom blossomed in Brinepaw's chest as he squinted up into the rain. Where had the sun gone? Hadn't it been pleasantly warm just moments ago?

The previously sun-baked sand was now brown and fluffy, ruffled up by the harsh gusts of wind that blew wildly around the beach. As Brinepaw scrabbled across the shore, another flash of violet illuminated a nightmarish image before him.

Bodies covered every tail-length of the shoreline, their fur torn away to reveal muscle that had been ripped apart and burned. Blood seeped into the sand, staining the landscape an unsettling rosy hue. The sky was clogged with gloomy snow, and the scent of singed flesh suffocated the air around him. Brinepaw cried out in absolute terror, tucking his long tail between his haunches and sprinting blindly forward.

But it did not stop. The bodies continued down the beach, lined up one after another in a cruel arrangement of death. Brinepaw began to recognize the crude, battered remains of some of his clanmates. A screech escaped his jaws as he came suddenly face to face with the body of Covestorm.

His mentor's body was furless and shriveled, toasted to the point that his peeling skin had transformed into sizzling black meat. His corpse was strewn haphazardly across the ground, his cooked, skeletal hind legs barely gracing the waves as they roared onto the beach. Brinepaw yelped, leaping backwards and shielding his eyes from the gruesome sight. As he skidded backwards, the apprentice knocked into a large body.

Brinepaw whirled around, his claws unsheathed and teeth bared. Covestorm stood there, baffled. His orange eyes glinted with unease. His fur was long and healthy looking and had been brushed to one side by the harsh wind. Behind the tom, Brinepaw could see the line of bodies still resting on the beach, soaked with blood. Smoke wreathed around nearby trees and glowing orange light poured from the hills. Brinepaw's nostrils stung.

Covestorm extended a large paw, "Brinepaw—"

Brinepaw shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Brinepaw!"

I'm not safe.

The thunder rumbled overhead.

I'm not safe.

The earth shook.

I'll never *be safe.*

"Snap out of it!"

Brinepaw's eyes shot wide open. Covestorm stood over him. His normally powerful frame was now drenched and pathetic. The rain hammered both toms with astounding force, and Brinepaw realized suddenly that his vision had ended. The carcasses of his clanmates had disappeared and the only thing the air smelled of now was fresh rain.

"Are you okay?" Covestorm's meow was weak.

"I t-think so." Brinepaw stammered.

By the way Covestorm's tabby fur bristled, Brinepaw could tell he was not convinced. But the big tom gave a curt nod and padded away, his tail sagging.

For a moment Brinepaw could do nothing but sit there, stunned. Ever so slowly, he was able to tame his breathing.

Another few seconds, and then he was on his feet, hurrying after Covestorm with his tail held high in the rain.

The trek back to camp was eerie. The rain began to let up and gradually evolved to become a gentle misting. The thunder was now far off, only reverberating very quietly from the distance every few minutes. The aftermath of the storm left the world silent and lonely.

Brinepaw's soggy fur was plastered against his body and he was left feeling very cold. As he followed Covestorm, placing his small paws in his mentor's large paw prints, he shivered non-stop. His mind was blank in the gray of the sky and water.

two

Brinepaw woke the next morning to the gentle pitter-patter of rain drumming against the roof of the apprentices' den. He rolled onto one shoulder and opened his bronze eyes, blinking to adjust to the light. "It's still raining?" he asked, grumbling sleepily.

"Of course it's still raining. It's been raining for moons, why should it stop now?"

The bitter reply came from Bluepaw, the oldest apprentice in the den. He was sitting at the mouth of the den, peering out into camp through olive green eyes. Outside, Brinepaw could see that despite the rain, the sun was shining brightly. The camp looked beautiful and majestic in the wash of sunlit drizzle.

Brinepaw sat up, "How come you aren't out training?" he questioned, cleaning one paw with his tongue.

Bluepaw looked at him with an irritated expression, "I was waiting for you, trout-head. Remember? We're supposed to train together today?"

When Brinepaw's only response was to stare blankly, Bluepaw scoffed and turned around, his tail whisking behind him as he left the den.

Lazily, Brinepaw hoisted himself up onto his paws and stretched. He didn't feel bothered by the other apprentice's hostility; Bluepaw was always like that. Besides, if *he* were constantly living in the shadow of Heronstrike and Covestorm, he supposed he'd feel hostile too. It couldn't be easy being the younger brother of the two most prestigious warriors in the clan.

The camp was beginning to wake up. Bits and pieces of passing conversations wafted into the den, signaling the start of a new day. Brinepaw guessed he couldn't put off his duties any longer.

He pushed past the tendrils of moss that hung over the entrance to the den, their wetness seeping through his fur as he went. Bluepaw had already trotted off to find Rainflight and Covestorm, so Brinepaw waited patiently for his return. He took the time to observe the work being done around camp. Most everyone was out and about, either getting ready to head out on patrol or chatting over plump morsels of fresh-kill. The soft hum of conversation filled the entire camp.

Brinepaw was sitting in the sand when Bluepaw appeared again, this time with Covestorm and Rainflight at his side. Covestorm seemed relieved to see his apprentice awake. He smiled, "Good morning, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw acknowledged the greeting with a half-hearted flick of his tail.

Rainflight scowled, clearly annoyed by Brinepaw's unenthused attitude.

"Alright," Covestorm cut the palpable tension with a swift interjection, "We're going to be practicing some fighting techniques today, so we'll be heading to the mossy clearing."

Bluepaw snorted, eyeing Brinepaw up and down. "At least give me a challenge."

"Actually," Covestorm narrowed his eyes at the apprentice, "You won't be dueling each other. We're just going to work on some basic moves."

Beside him, Rainflight blinked in interest, "No no, that's a good idea."

"What is?"

"Let's have them battle," Rainflight flicked a dark gray ear, gesturing to the two apprentices.

Covestorm fell silent for a moment, his dark tabby tail swishing back and forth on the sand. He pretended to think. Then he shrugged, "Okay, if you insist."

Bluepaw bounced on his toes excitedly as the two warriors turned and led them through camp. The red rocks that served as dens jutted from the beach on either side, their russet surfaces glimmering with moisture. Brinepaw allowed his mind to wander as his paws sunk into the drenched sand beneath him. He wasn't afraid of fighting Bluepaw—the apprentice was no bigger than a pinecone—but he *was* afraid of further disappointing Covestorm. What would his mentor say if he lost?

Truthfully, it was more frightening to think about what he *wouldn't* say. When Covestorm got mad, he would clam up and refuse to speak. That silence was terrifying to Brinepaw because it reminded him of all the things he hated about himself. When there were no words to fill the space, his own consciousness would fill it for him. It was in that silence that all of Brinepaw's darkest thoughts came to life. It was in the blankness of Covestorm's stare that words began appearing. *Weak, incompetent, worthless...*

There truly was no middle road. If there was anywhere for him to belong, it had to be here.

Because, if he didn't belong in TideClan, that meant he was lost. Brinepaw didn't want to be lost.

Up ahead, patches of spongy grass grew through the coarse layer of sand. The tall figures of trees sprung up into the air, their branches reaching and stretching to touch the sky. Soft-feathered birds fluttered above the treetops, singing back and forth through their tiny beaks, seemingly undisturbed by the shower of rain.

Brinepaw watched his hickory paws as they pounded on the sand. Then the sand became dirt and the dirt became mud and the mud became a puddle. The group of cats walked right into the puddle, their legs dragging through the water. Bluepaw groaned as he waded along, his face screwed up in disgust. Brinepaw didn't mind, however. The touch of the puddle was cool and refreshing, a good distraction from the business inside his head.

As they climbed back onto dry land, the rain started to intensify. Brinepaw yipped in surprise, crouching down onto a squishy layer of mud. He squinted through the sheet of pearly

moisture, trying to locate the others. He spotted Bluepaw's small figure clambering desperately onto the slick grass. When the tom began to slip, Brinepaw hurried over on unsteady paws and shoved him upwards. Bluepaw let out a grunt as his claws scraped through the slippery soil. Brinepaw gave him another push and at last the blue-gray apprentice flopped onto the bank.

Covestorm and Rainflight appeared above them, their ears and fur hammered flat against their skin. "Maybe we should turn back?" Covestorm suggested, glancing over at Rainflight's shivering figure. Brinepaw was tempted to voice his agreement, but he waited patiently for the warrior's response.

"It'll pass." Rainflight meowed unconvincingly.

"Are you sure?" Covestorm sounded skeptical.

Rainflight arched his back slightly, growling, "I am your deputy, Covestorm."

Covestorm bowed his head. "Well," he said, "Let's at least find some shelter while we wait."

The four cats gathered underneath the broad green leaves of a nearby bush. They huddled together, trembling in the cold. Brinepaw rested his head against the squashy earth, too exhausted to care that dark, stinking mud was pressed against his chin. He examined the forest, watching as huge clouds dropped what seemed like the entire ocean onto the trees. He felt his anxiety returning, but he swallowed his thoughts and embraced the soft swooshing sound of the falling rain.

After what seemed like moons, the storm began tapering off into mist once more. Rainflight was the first to get up, but not before shooting Covestorm an arrogant look. He scrambled out of the ditch, trotting into the sun as it broke through the rain clouds onto the forest floor. The forest was glowing again.

Brinepaw followed Rainflight, his tail drooping. Nobody said a word as they pressed on in the direction of the mossy clearing. The ground beneath them was saturated with rainwater, so much so

that every time Brinepaw stepped, water squished beneath his paws. He watched as Covestorm strode with his head bent in shame. He wanted to comfort his mentor, but like always, he wasn't sure what to say.

When at last they arrived, they saw that the clearing was filled with glistening puddles. Bluepaw bounded into the center of the clearing, seemingly rejuvenated by the prospect of battle. "Let's go!" he cried, dropping into a crouch.

"Wait a minute," Covestorm called from the edge of the space, "Meet with Rainflight first. He'll give you some tips and pointers before we begin."

Bluepaw frowned, but he obeyed and hurried over to join Rainflight underneath a large elm.

Brinepaw paused alongside his mentor and sat down. Above him, he could hear a squirrel scrabbling around in the branches of a birch tree. Its tantalizing scent floated down into his nostrils and his mouth began to water. "Can't we hunt instead?" he pleaded to Covestorm.

"I'm afraid not," his mentor sighed, "I know you don't like fighting, Brinepaw, but it's an important part of a warrior's duty. You're going to have to learn someday."

Brinepaw shook out his mottled, caramel brown pelt and gave his chest fur a couple of licks. "I understand that," he said.

Covestorm smiled warmly, "Good. You'll do great. You just have to remember to stay quick and light on your toes. Bluepaw's small and fast, so he's going to try to use that against you. Be prepared."

"Okay," Brinepaw squared his shoulders and stood up. Truthfully, he wasn't sure he could do that. He was rather big for an apprentice, and his size made him clumsy. He pushed the thought away and hurried to the center of the mossy clearing, splashing through puddles as he went. Bluepaw was already there, sitting calmly with his thin tail curled around his paws.

The two apprentices lined up across from one another, staring with equal intensity. Brinepaw gulped; Bluepaw's sharp green eyes were burning with ferocity. He was breathing hard. Brinepaw sniffed and tilted his head to one side, analyzing the small tom. Why was he taking this so seriously?

Rainflight stood at the edge of the trees, his tail lifted in the air. "Keep your claws sheathed," he reminded them, then he brought his tail down in one swift motion, "Begin!"

Instantly, Bluepaw shot forward with his paws outstretched, grasping for Brinepaw. Brinepaw ducked at the last minute, but Bluepaw's pads graced the top of his head as he whizzed through the air. The apprentice landed smoothly on the muddy soil as Brinepaw turned around to face him. Bluepaw's eyes were a flurry of light emerald and dark jade as he sprinted forward once more. This time, Brinepaw was ready.

He caught Bluepaw's shoulder with one paw and pushed him backwards. The smaller tom toppled over, crying out in surprise. Brinepaw backpedaled into the line of trees that surrounded the clearing, crouching behind a patch of sharp brambles. When Bluepaw recovered from his fall, he pulled himself back onto his feet and searched around, easily spying Brinepaw's outline in the undergrowth. "Nice try," he said as he stalked forward, his tail twitching in anticipation.

Brinepaw stood still, fear pulsating through his veins. His bronze eyes widened as Bluepaw grew nearer and his breath tightened. He whimpered, folding onto the ground and pressing his face into the mud. It was cool, and it smelled like the beginnings of newleaf. Fresh life. He sat and waited for the pain.

"Get up!"

Brinepaw was jerked back into reality by the sound of Covestorm's voice. He bolted upwards and raced away from the treeline. Almost immediately, the sound of Bluepaw's paws on the forest floor was close behind him. The pounding grew louder, and soon Brinepaw could feel Bluepaw's hot breath on his heels. Each second seemed to expand to become one, long, dreadful minute.

Finally, Bluepaw was upon him. He barreled into Brinepaw's hind legs, knocking him into the ground. Brinepaw's belly crunched against the forest floor and flecks of mud flew through the air. He gasped as the sharpness of his fall blasted through his body and sucked the air from his lungs.

Hissing with frustration, Brinepaw turned himself onto his back and delivered a few blows to Bluepaw's face. The apprentice shifted his shoulders and slammed his paws down, pinning Brinepaw to the moist forest floor. Brinepaw heard the mud squish beneath him as he sunk further and further down. He thrashed back and forth helplessly, throwing his hind paws into Bluepaw's abdomen in a pitiful show of resilience.

It was no use. Bluepaw loomed above him with his white teeth bared. His fur was matted and dirty, soaked thoroughly by the rain. His disheveled pelt was stained brown and black. Only his eyes remained their vibrant green, glowing and shimmering with the thrill of victory.

"That's enough!" Rainflight shouted, jostling Brinepaw back into the moment. He lay there, stunned, as Bluepaw pulled away and trotted over to join his mentor.

Covestorm's placid face appeared above him, his fur dripping wet. He blinked his orange eyes, like fireflies flickering on and off in the night. "You did well," he rumbled proudly.

Brinepaw said nothing.

His mentor bent down and nudged him to his feet. "Come on," Covestorm mewed, "We need to get back to camp."

Brinepaw trembled, suddenly remembering how cold he was. "Okay," he agreed quietly, following Covestorm into the trees.

Rainflight led them back towards TideClan camp, Bluepaw at his side. The two cats held their heads together, murmuring. Brinepaw lowered his head shamefully and walked silently.

Covestorm poked him with one paw. "Quit moping,

Brinepaw," he said, "You fought a good battle, that's all that matters."

"I ran away and hid in the trees," Brinepaw groaned, remembering how scared he'd been.

"So what?" Covestorm countered, "Battles are frightening. There's no shame in being afraid. In fact, if you weren't afraid, there'd be something wrong with you."

Brinepaw shook his head, "No. I shouldn't of been afraid. It wasn't even a real battle."

His mentor shrugged, "Sure, but sometimes it can feel like a real battle."

"I can't believe you're related to that fish-face," Brinepaw grumbled.

"Bluepaw can be a pawful sometimes," Covestorm chuckled, "But he's a good cat at heart."

Covestorm continued talking, but Brinepaw tuned him out. He gazed out across the land ahead of them, where the trees thinned and the stretch of sand returned. The sun, broken by clouds, cast patches of sparkling gold onto the beach. The salty brine of the sea was carried to his nose on an ocean breeze, and the whispering of faraway waves floated to his ears.

How could someplace so idyllic and peaceful still feel so strange?

As he began to walk on the sand, its touch against his paws felt foreign. The squawking of the seagulls overhead sounded far off and out of place. Even the smell and the taste of the air did not seem familiar to him.

Home, he felt breath on his ear, *This is your home.*

Brinepaw watched the sun on the horizon. Far away, the sky was on fire. Beyond the rain and the grayness of the storm, rose and soft tangerine painted the clouds. Beauty so apparent, and yet so

out of reach.

Be patient, the voice murmured, *You will see.*

three

The camp was buzzing with activity when they returned. Murmurs of excitement rose into the damp air and cats zig-zagged about. At the heart of camp, a crowd was congregating underneath the Red Cliff. Brinepaw glanced upwards to see TideClan's leader, Almondstar, sitting proudly at its peak. Her creamy, russet fur was wet, but she still managed to look distinguished and powerful.

"This must be about the gathering," Covestorm guessed, hurrying over to find a seat in the mass of cats.

Bluepaw let out an eager shout, racing after Covestorm with his ears pinned down against the rain.

Brinepaw followed more slowly, his gaze skirting the throng of moving bodies. He spotted the pale brown pelt of his sister, Fawnpaw, and went to join her. He shouldered past a few warriors, apologizing profusely each time he bumped them.

"Brinepaw!" Fawnpaw rose to her paws quickly, her tail shooting straight into the air, "How was your training session?"

"Great," Brinepaw lied, plopping onto the ground beside her.

Fawnpaw's pink nose twitched happily, "Glad to hear it. You're lucky, Brinepaw. All Sandfire ever has me do is gather and sort herbs."

Together, they settled in and waited for the meeting to start. Brinepaw pretended to yawn, not wanting to talk any more. He knew Fawnpaw was probably itching to ask more questions. After all, this was the first training session he'd attended in a while. But the last thing he wanted to do was discuss his severe lack of motivation with his bubbly, overly-cheerful sister.

Almondstar waited for the noise to die down, her striking cyan eyes trained on the cats beneath her. When at last all was quiet, she

stood up, her paws slipping slightly on the glossy stone.

"Cats of TideClan," Almondstar's voice was clear as she addressed her warriors, "As I'm sure all of you are aware, there is a gathering tonight. I've decided to take Rainflight, Sandfire, Heronstrike, and the apprentices. We will start our journey to the border stream once the moon begins to rise."

Brinepaw's eyes were jerked to the center of the crowd as Sunclaw leapt to his feet, "*All* the apprentices?" he gasped, his white and golden fur bristling in astonishment.

"Yes, all the apprentices," Almondstar replied simply, "You are dismissed."

As the meeting broke up, Brinepaw noticed the puzzled looks on his clanmates' faces.

"Wow!" Fawnpaw breathed, "All the apprentices! What is WaveClan going to think?"

"Who cares?" Bluepaw broke into the conversation, shuffling over to them with a pleased expression on his face, "We get to go to the gathering!"

Brinepaw shrugged his shoulders, "We've been to gatherings before. What's the big deal?"

Instead of answering, Bluepaw pranced off to join Milkpaw and Bunnypaw, who were whispering excitedly to each other several fox lengths away. Milkpaw's plumed white tail lashed back and forth and her sky blue eyes were stretched wide. Bunnypaw's back was turned to Brinepaw, but he could tell by her body language that she shared her sister's enthusiasm.

He turned to look at Fawnpaw, "I don't understand why everyone's freaking out. It's just a gathering. I've been to loads of gatherings."

"Because," Fawnpaw grinned, "*All* the apprentices are going. That never happens!" Without another word, she raced away to the medicine cat's den, her paws flying over the sand.

Brinepaw let out an exasperated sigh as his sister disappeared into the crevice that led into the medicine cat's den. Now, all around him, darkness infiltrated the camp. The sky was black, only a few stars visible beyond the blanketing of thick rainclouds. The air was chilly from the rainy weather and nighttime mist crept across the beach and crawled over the rocks.

Everything felt very clear and open, like a realm of nothing but empty space. Brinepaw was beginning to forget that it was raining; now the cool droplets seemed to exist as part of the air rather than a separate liquid, like a normal characteristic of the territory. The voices of his clanmates had disappeared, leaving just an unnerving and haunting silence.

A shiver passed through Brinepaw's body and his stomach let out a sharp-edged growl. He eyed the fresh-kill pile, his mouth watering, and considered getting something to eat. But, instead, something drew his paws to the very edge of camp.

He gazed out across the empty beach. The foamy waves of the ocean were faintly visible in the blackness of the night. The dark brown sand was dappled with imprints left by the harsh raindrops, leaving intricate designs in the shoreline. It felt suddenly as if the entire world were made of water. Brinepaw could picture the entire beach flooded, an endless stretch of ocean that swallowed everything in its path. It felt suddenly as if everything were about to change.

"Brinepaw!"

Brinepaw's thoughts were shook by the sound of his friend, Burnetpaw, calling his name. He spun around to see the russet tabby waving him over with his tail. Surrounding Burnetpaw were the rest of the cats chosen to attend the gathering. Almondstar stood at the head of the group with Rainflight at her side. The full moon was huge behind them, rising into the sky like a silver ball of ice.

Brinepaw bounded over to join them, his muscles still aching from his battle with Bluepaw earlier that day. As soon as he reached the group, Almondstar gave the command and they were on the move.

Brinepaw ran alongside Burnetpaw, already beginning to pant.

"Where's Fawnpaw?" he asked, realizing that his sister was nowhere to be seen.

"It turns out Almondstar only wanted the *warrior* apprentices to come," Burnetpaw explained, "And she had to stay behind to look after the clan anyway, since Sandfire is coming."

"She must be so disappointed."

Burnetpaw nodded, "You should've seen the look on her face when Sandfire told her. I thought for a minute she was going to claw his ears off."

The rusty-colored tom let out a little chuckle, but Brinepaw couldn't share in his amusement. He felt sorry for Fawnpaw; she was always looking forward to seeing the other medicine cat apprentices. He imagined it was lonely for her, being the only one in the clan.

As they sped along, the wet sand was kicked up by their hammering paws and flecks of moisture sprayed their faces. Brinepaw peered through half-closed eyes at the land ahead of him, but it was just a flat expanse of darkly colored earth. The border stream was still a ways away.

Brinepaw expected his thoughts to go running wild again, just as they had the day before on the beach, but his mind was surprisingly calm. He wondered if his sheer exhaustion was responsible for quieting his subconscious, but he didn't think too long or hard on it. He was lulled into a state of meditation by the thumping of paws and rain. Time seemed to become like the mist, muddled and confused and like faded white air. Each moment passed slowly until suddenly it was gone and all the scenery around Brinepaw had changed. Scraggly trees rose from the grass of the field, decorated by cone-shaped leaves that flipped back and forth in the wind, exposing their paler underbellies. The leaves rattled in the rain and appeared to wave to the cats as they passed by. Brinepaw was overcome with the urge to turn back. His gut twisted and rolled. Something was very wrong.

At last they'd arrived. Almondstar slowed to a trot as the rushing, rain-swelled stream appeared ahead of them. The water spilled onto either bank as it slushed around violently, refusing to follow its normal path. Across the border stream, dark figures watched them with eyes that glowed in the moonlight.

"WaveClan," Burnetpaw whispered in Brinepaw's ear.

Brinepaw felt fearful. He faintly heard Almondstar order them to fan out and socialize, but he was frozen to the spot.

"Come on," Burnetpaw nagged, wiggling his haunches excitedly, "Let's go talk to the other apprentices!"

His friend cleared the raging stream in one easy jump, but Brinepaw didn't bother following him. Every inch of his body shook with fright.

A warm head nudged his side and Brinepaw turned quickly to see Milkpaw staring at him. Even in the darkness, her blue eyes were as light as the sky on a fresh greenleaf morning. But there was also concern swirling in the watery depths of her irises. "Are you okay?" she asked him, laying her wet tail on his shoulder.

"Yes," Brinepaw tried his best to sound sincere, "I'm just very cold."

"Me too," Milkpaw agreed, nestling up to him and shifting her legs closer until they sat flank to flank. Brinepaw could feel his breath catch in his throat. He blinked and gazed off into the night, not daring to look over at the she-cat. With Milkpaw pressed against him, he wasn't sure what to do. He was sure she didn't mean anything by it, but it still made him somewhat uncomfortable to have her so close.

They stayed like that for a long time, just breathing in the drops of rain and struggling to keep warm. Then two toms from WaveClan sauntered up to them, the larger of the two wearing a smirk on his tabby striped face. "Cold?" he teased, sitting down before them.

Brinepaw could sense an unfriendliness in his tone. "No," he mumbled in reply. Milkpaw leaned further into him.

"Are you sure?" the tabby scoffed, twitching a black ear, "You look pretty cold to me."

"Cut it out, Nightpaw," the smaller tom spoke up, sitting down next to his clanmate. He glanced over at Brinepaw and Milkpaw with apologetic eyes, "Sorry about my brother. He's got twigs in his pelt almost all the time. I'm Plumpaw, by the way."

Plumpaw looked puny next to his more muscular brother. His light gray fur was slicked down by the rain, making him appear even more scrawny. He was skinny and twitchy and slightly awkward, but there was kindness in his soft hazel eyes. Brinepaw allowed himself to ease up a bit.

It wasn't long before Nightpaw was running his mouth again. He boasted about his hunting skills and claimed to have climbed the tallest tree in WaveClan territory. Brinepaw couldn't help but notice that the black tabby's eyes were trained on Milkpaw the entire time he spoke. His words were arrogant and bold, but his face told a different story. Brinepaw considered leaving to find Burnetpaw, but the sound of Almondstar's voice cut into his thoughts.

"The gathering will now begin!"

Almondstar was sitting with the WaveClan leader, Adderstar, on the opposite bank. Brinepaw and the other apprentices shifted to face them as all the other cats bounded over to claim a position nearby. Brinepaw tried to locate Burnetpaw among the throng of bodies, but to no avail. Thankfully, Milkpaw had scooted a little bit further away, but her rain-spiked fur still tingled against his.

Both leaders shared details from the last moon while everyone listened patiently. The rain battered them from above, so Almondstar and Adderstar tried to speak as quickly as they could. There was very little tension hovering between the two clans, which was rather rare. Brinepaw supposed that neither leader wanted to be out in the rain longer than necessary, and so they were deliberately avoiding any sensitive topics that had the potential to spark controversy.

As Adderstar was finishing his report, the storm took a turn for the

worse. Suddenly the sky opened up and poured sheets of endless rain onto the land below. The clouds that were once dark gray became a threatening, coal black. The wind screamed as it blew across the fields, whipping entire walls of rain against the delicate flanks of the clan cats. Milkpaw cried out in surprise as she was pounded with water. Brinepaw leapt to his feet and attempted to hold himself steady as the strong winds swirled around him.

It was as if the world were drowning. The riverbed flooded and suddenly they were standing in nearly a tail-length of water. Almondstar's panicked yowl rose above the noise of the crowd as she tried frantically to gather her clan around her. "Get back to camp! Follow me!"

Brinepaw wiped the rain from his eyes with one paw and searched desperately for his leader. But nearly everyone had disappeared. Far away, the dim silhouettes of warriors scrambled to find safety among their clans. Brinepaw waded towards their fading shapes, but his muscles were oddly fatigued. He paused in the water, sputtering and coughing and fighting to breathe. When he looked up again, he was all alone.

He stood there in that lonely lake, unable to think for himself. His mind was jumbled to the point where he wasn't even sure who he was. Fog crept in on him from all sides, molesting his fur and encasing his entire body. A tremendous gust of wind traveled the surface of the water towards him; he could see it in the darkly colored ripples as they moved with great speed. When it reached him, he was knocked backwards into the overflowing stream.

For a moment, he was completely submerged. The water was icy cold. When he came up again, he was gasping for air and just barely holding onto life. His claws touched the ground beneath him and he scrabbled back into the shallows. In front of him stretched a vast body of water. An entire ocean, dropped from the sky like a gift.

In the water was the reflection of the moon. Brinepaw stared at its pearly white figure with fascination, his blood pounding in his ears. Then he noticed his face in the reflection as well. His sharp bronze eyes and flattened hickory fur were overlain onto the moon. He looked weak and pathetic in the water, with the stunning ivory

circle rising up behind him. The rain continued to fall and the waves lapped at his chest fur, but Brinepaw could not bring himself to move. He could not tear his eyes from the image that lay before him.

All of his strength poured out into the nighttime air. Emptiness consumed him. The water drained from the land and Brinepaw crumpled limply onto the bare ground. The world was a wasteland of starved earth and he lay in the middle of it.

four

Light was just beginning to creep over the southern mountains and into the sky when Brinepaw awoke. It flooded the expanse of space above him, turning the dark navy of the night to a pale cyan that spoke of daybreak. The apprentice's eyelids fluttered open but his mind did not wake up until several seconds later. His vision focused on the few blades of rain-stamped grass that grew in front of his face. Beyond them, Brinepaw realized there was nothing but a flat expanse of meadow.

He gently pulled himself upright and glanced around wearily. No matter the direction he chose to look, he was no less alone. His head was foggy. Had he fallen asleep? Where were the others? Everything seemed empty and strange.

Without even thinking, Brinepaw automatically began walking towards TideClan camp. He left the stream behind him, only glancing back once to see the thin body of water rushing quickly past either bank. The fields around him were saturated with liquid, but there was no sign of the ocean that had appeared so suddenly the night before. *Was it all a dream?* Brinepaw wondered to himself. He thought back to the vision he'd had on the shoreline. It was becoming harder and harder for him to distinguish between reality and the fabrications of his mind.

The entire territory looked eerie and abandoned. Brinepaw had assumed he'd run into a patrol sooner or later, but there were no signs of clan life. He slunk low to the ground as he went, hanging his head but keeping his ears pricked for the slightest noise.

It only took a short while for Brinepaw to get spooked. He broke into a run, unable to bear the silence any longer. He *had* to get back to camp and confirm that his clan still existed.

He flew across the plains, veering off to the right when at last the forest tree line came into view. He observed the greenery carefully as he passed, checking for warriors out on patrol. But,

unsurprisingly, there was nothing.

Brinepaw felt revitalized. He remembered the incredible weakness that he'd felt at the gathering, but there was no more of that now. He felt limber and spry and capable for the first time in his life. There was power pumping in his legs and energy flowing through his body. He felt he could go on running for moons.

The difference in how he was feeling only served to frighten him further. He needed to find the others before something terrible happened. For StarClan's sake, where *were* they?

As if to answer his question, a figure appeared ahead of him, bounding over a small grassy hill. The darkly streaked coat of a tomcat became clear as Brinepaw's eyes adjusted. *Covestorm!*

Brinepaw raced to his mentor's side. There was an apparent flash of relief behind the tabby's gold-flecked eyes when he recognized his apprentice. The two of them united underneath the morning sun, Brinepaw's breathing flaked with anxiety.

Covestorm must have sensed the young tom's unease, because he comforted him with a gentle nudge, "It's okay now, Brinepaw. We found you."

"What happened?" Brinepaw pulled away and tried to ask the question as calmly as possible.

The big tabby's head shook like a rustling bush, "We aren't sure. There was a lot of confusion last night. When we got back to camp, we realized you weren't there. I figured you were still at the gathering site and I offered to go and retrieve you. But Almondstar insisted we wait until sunrise."

"Why?"

Covestorm looked apologetic, "Well, that's what *I* said. But I guess she was just concerned for our safety. That storm was very peculiar. Not to mention very dangerous."

Brinepaw tried to understand his leader's reasoning, but he couldn't help feeling a bit betrayed. He could've been in serious trouble, and

yet Almondstar had waited to send warriors out after him. What if he'd died? Would his clan even have cared?

He fell silent as two more warriors trotted over to join them. They were panting. It was Covestorm's brother Heronstrike and Brinepaw's own mother, Sagecloud. Sagecloud's tawny pelt bristled with worry. "Thank StarClan you're alright!" she gasped, pressing her nose into Brinepaw's flank.

The chestnut-colored apprentice recoiled from her touch and Sagecloud withdrew her head, looking hurt.

Heronstrike ignored the uncomfortable moment between them and meowed, "We should be getting back." Covestorm murmured his agreement and the four cats set out for camp. Brinepaw walked with Covestorm and disregarded the frequent glances from Sagecloud. He kept his gaze trained on the mud and grass ahead of him.

Covestorm tried dutifully to quiet Brinepaw's reeling thoughts with casual chatter. He talked about the clan and the other apprentices, but he never once mentioned the gathering or the storm. Rather than making him feel better, however, Brinepaw felt worse with every word out of his mentor's mouth. The topic of the night before hung like a nest of bees over their heads. Brinepaw wished that Covestorm would stop talking.

But the one-sided conversation continued all the way to camp and soon Brinepaw was standing outside of the apprentice's den. Heronstrike ran off to inform Almondstar of his safe arrival, and Sagecloud left to tell his father, Fleetwater. Only Brinepaw and Covestorm remained by the den.

The soot gray tabby was looking at Brinepaw with flaming orange eyes. The apprentice pretended not to notice and stood in the entrance of the den awkwardly, waiting for Covestorm to leave.

"I'm not going anywhere," Covestorm grunted in a low voice.

"Are we training today?" asked Brinepaw.

The senior warrior watched Brinepaw closely, his face thoughtful. Then he frowned, "Don't try and change the subject, Brinepaw. What happened last night?"

Brinepaw was suddenly unable to contain his frustration, "You tell me!" he answered indignantly.

Covestorm blinked but said nothing.

"Nevermind!" Brinepaw huffed, dropping his head and scuffing the sand with his claws. "Let's just forget the whole thing. I never want to think about that gathering ever again. It was a disaster."

"We can't act as if nothing happened," Covestorm pointed out with a flick of his long tail, "That storm was like nothing this clan has ever seen. And why were you gone all night? Couldn't you have walked back on your own?"

"I passed out," Brinepaw's voice softened and his eyes drifted to the ground sadly.

His fur stirred with a passing breeze. The smell of ocean air was all around. Covestorm barely even twitched at the comment. His face was stony and expressionless, as usual. Something about the way his mentor was able to stay so indifferent infuriated Brinepaw. He longed for that kind of self-control.

"You passed out," echoed Covestorm.

"Yes."

Covestorm nodded, as if he were accepting this as the truth. "Very well," he said.

Brinepaw hoped that he would go away, but the striped warrior stood still for a very long time. It didn't look like he was thinking, and yet it did not look like his mind was blank. He was caught in some in between stage, the moment right before you realize that you've been daydreaming. The period of waking up.

Then he was talking again. "No lesson today," he told Brinepaw, "You have the day to yourself." Covestorm turned and stalked away,

his footsteps poised and calculated. Brinepaw was left in shock. No training? Even after he'd disappeared unexpectedly and caused a panic? It seemed Covestorm was losing his touch.

Brinepaw decided to go out and explore. It wasn't often that he felt motivated enough to get out by himself, so he supposed he might as well take this opportunity to see more of the territory. After all, he was still feeling uncharacteristically strong.

He stopped in the medicine cat's den briefly to check on Fawnpaw. She was happy to see him after his troubling disappearance, and she kept him busy with questions about the gathering. Eventually, Sandfire came over, his beige pelt prickling with annoyance.

"Move along now, Brinepaw," the tom scolded, "You're distracting my apprentice from her daily tasks."

"Sorry," Brinepaw mumbled as he left the den.

He kept walking until he'd left camp entirely and reached the edge of the sea. Waves ebbed away from the shoreline, exposing starfish and colorful shells in the in the sand. Brinepaw sniffed at a few starfish and even found a crab inside one of the larger shells, but soon boredom soured his mood.

The sun now hung high in the sky, indicating that it was midday. Brinepaw's stomach rumbled and growled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since yesterday. He followed the waterline away from camp, searching for a good spot to fish.

Puffy clouds doused in tangerine light cast gray shadows on the water below. Farther out, Brinepaw could see that the waves became large and unpredictable. They moved in every direction, beautiful ripples dancing on their foamy crests. There were a few sandbars, but there were also dark spots were Brinepaw imagined the water continued so far down that at the bottom, there was no light at all. He wondered if any TideClan cat had ever dove down and touched the seafloor underneath one of those dark spots. Probably not. It seemed impossible.

He came upon a place on the beach where he could see silver fish

darting around underneath the water. They were small and fast, but Brinepaw was too hungry to go on looking. He waded into the ocean and then waited motionlessly for several minutes.

When the fish began returning to the area around his paws, Brinepaw ducked his face into the water and snapped his jaws around a tiny fish with glimmering, pearly scales. Its slippery body nearly slid out from between his teeth, but Brinepaw managed to clench his mouth tight enough to hold onto his kill.

He carried it with him back to shore and devoured it in a few quick gulps. His mouth watered at the fish's salty aftertaste and his stomach requested more food. Brinepaw waded once more into the shallows.

A sharp cry sounded from further down shore. The silver fish scattered and Brinepaw whirled around, splashing crystal droplets of water through the air. His throat tightened as his eyes focused on a group of cats standing chest-deep in water only a few fox-lengths away. A pungent smell caused his nostrils to flare.

WaveClan!

Sudden fear swept away all of Brinepaw's previous thoughts. He raised his hackles and bared his teeth in a poor attempt to intimidate the intruders. There were three of them: one tom and two she cats. By their size, Brinepaw guessed they were all apprentices. Then he recognized the jet black coat of the tomcat. It was Nightpaw!

On one side of Nightpaw stood a gray-furred she-cat and at his other flank was an amber and white tabby. They were coming towards him, striding through the water with confidence and ease. Nightpaw's lips curled upwards into a smug smile. His hazel eyes were alive with anticipation.

"You're on my territory," Brinepaw informed them as they closed in.

Nightpaw laughed, "We know." The pretty golden tabby gave a small chuckle while the gray she-cat seemed uncomfortable. She kept glancing down at the rolling water, and Brinepaw thought he

saw shame in her eyes.

Brinepaw hadn't expected that kind of a response. He wasn't sure what to do. "So get off," he growled matter-of-factly.

The three WaveClan apprentices held their ground.

A wave splattered against Brinepaw's chest, knocking him to the side slightly. He tried to look as dignified as possible as he spoke again, "What do you want?"

"Nothing," mewed the gray she-cat with the soft fur, "Come on, Nightpaw. We crossed the border like we said we wanted to. Let's just go now."

"We *said* we wanted to explore, Lavenderpaw," Nightpaw didn't look away from Brinepaw's eyes.

The amber tabby grinned, "Right. Let's go onshore and look around."

"That's exactly what I was thinking, Lilypaw." Nightpaw lead the group towards the beach. Lavenderpaw slinked along, glancing apologetically at Brinepaw as she followed her clanmates. Something about the way she looked in that moment reminded Brinepaw of someone. Suddenly he realized that she must be Plumpaw's sister. *Great StarClan,* he thought bitterly, *Are Plumpaw and Lavenderpaw the only nice apprentices in WaveClan?*

Stress flooded through Brinepaw's veins as he watched them grow nearer to the sand. He knew he couldn't just let them trespass without at least putting up a fight. But fear held him to one spot. If he couldn't even take on Bluepaw in a pretend fight, how would he hold up if a real battle broke out? Besides, there were three of them and only one of him.

Brinepaw realized he could make all the excuses he wanted, but none of them would stop Nightpaw and the others from reaching the beach. Suddenly he made up his mind and bounded through the water to stand in their path. "Stop," he ordered, turning to face the WaveClan cats.

"Step aside," Nightpaw's black tabby fur was raised and bristling.

"I will not," Brinepaw insisted, although by this point he was feeling so scared that his entire body had gone numb.

Nightpaw scoffed, "If you don't get out of our way, you're going to get seriously hurt."

"I could take all three of you with my eyes closed."

Brinepaw was bluffing. He knew he was bluffing. The enemy apprentices knew he was bluffing. And yet Nightpaw took his words as a challenge. He lunged for Brinepaw, claws unsheathed as he hurtled through the air. His darkly colored fur was whisked back by a stream of seaborne wind. Brinepaw winced and crouched down further into the water, hoping that it would swallow him whole and he'd disappear. He was suddenly forced underwater by the weight of Nightpaw's body. He thrashed and struggled, but to no avail.

The realm underneath the waves was gorgeous and blue. Sunlight filtered through to the sandy floor. Brinepaw felt his lungs closing in on themselves and he scrabbled at the ground with his toes in an attempt to get his footing. His head was pressed nearly to the bottom and his ears were mashed painfully against his skull. He kicked and bucked and screamed, only to swallow mouthfuls of revolting saltwater.

In that instant, he understood that he was drowning. This stupid apprentice had trespassed onto his territory and now was drowning him. He would die in his own ocean. His body would float to the shore for his clanmates to pick up.

The idiocy of the situation was almost laughable. Brinepaw wanted to laugh until he filled with liquid and the darkness came for him. He wanted to give up. It was the easier thing to do. But there was so much anger rising inside of him, it was becoming uncomfortable to keep it down.

He convulsed in Nightpaw's grip. His tail curled and his back arched. There was a loud splash and Nightpaw's weight was lifted away from him.

Brinepaw's eyes shot open and stung with salt. He rose to the surface, choking up huge puddles of seawater. He was in the shallows now, able to stand. The world was beginning to come into focus again.

Nightpaw was standing a tail-length away, breathing hard. He was drenched and bleeding. Lavenderpaw and Lilypaw were behind him, awestruck.

"What did you *do* to me, you freak?" Nightpaw's voice was shrill and his eyes stretched in horror.

"What?" Brinepaw backed away, startled by the tom's haggard appearance.

Nightpaw glanced down at his chest, which was stained red, "You hurt me..."

"No..."

Dread cut Brinepaw's heart like a shard of ice. Nightpaw was coming for him again. He was running, his fur shaking, his blood flowing, pain burning in his sorrel eyes. He was so close. Brinepaw prepared to fight.

Suddenly, he summoned the water on either side of him. It floated into the air, twisting, curling, sending flashing droplets flying away in every direction. The water shot forward like magnificent, dazzling streamers. It slapped Nightpaw backwards with such force that the apprentice went completely under, conquered by a passing wave. Brinepaw could hear Lavenderpaw and Lilypaw gasp in disbelief.

Nightpaw recovered and arose from the depths, wearing an outraged expression. His nostrils flared and his whiskers twitched in agitation. Brinepaw stood still and stared at his attacker, frozen with shock.

"Freak!" Nightpaw said again, breaking into a run. Brinepaw saw the intent to kill behind his eyes.

He brought forward an enormous iridescent wave. It grew in size

until it stood more than five tail-lengths above Nightpaw's head. Brinepaw could see the tom's face through the wall of water. How quickly his bloodthirstiness had been replaced by fear. How quickly he realized he stood no chance.

The wave seemed to be all of the colors. One moment it held a silver sheen, the next it was blue and green and red and yellow all at once. Then there was purple tugging at its edge. Then it seemed to resemble an orange flame, a fire burning brightly on a starless night. Brinepaw marveled at its beauty, unable to believe what his paws were doing.

It crashed down on Nightpaw's head, then swept further back and shoved the WaveClan she-cats towards the open sea. They gurgled as they disappeared into the ocean, then popped up several seconds later and frantically swam to retrieve Nightpaw.

By the time they'd rescued Nightpaw from the seafloor, Brinepaw was already on the beach. Sand was wedged between his pads and matted into his fur. His eyes and throat stung of salt. He lay flopped over in the sand, his sides heaving. Lavenderpaw and Lilypaw approached, Nightpaw's body supported between them. The tabby tom was breathing, but just barely, and the paw prints he left in the sand were colored crimson with blood.

The two she-cats said nothing. Their movements were twitchy and timid.

They left without a word to him. Only incredulous, distrustful stares and the rhythm of their steps as they led Nightpaw back into WaveClan territory.

Brinepaw gazed vacantly at the horizon.

He did not move until the sun was going down.

Everything was silent and dead. Even the sound of the water lapping on the shore was strangely muted. There were no crabs, no turtles, and no birds.

He looked hard at the water. A single, round bubble floated up.

It's real.

He gasped and let go of the bubble, watching it fall with a *plunk* back into the sea.

five

For the third day in a row, Brinepaw brought back more prey than any of the other apprentices.

Dew sparkled on the grass and moistened his paws as he walked. The mass of fish he carried in his mouth made his jaw sore, but he didn't mind. Covestorm smiled approvingly as they met on the beach.

"You've become quite the hunter," his mentor noted, a curious sparkle twinkling in his orange eyes.

Brinepaw said nothing. He padded alongside the tom as they returned to camp.

"Especially when it comes to fish," Covestorm added, staring at the scaly creatures that hung from Brinepaw's teeth.

His tone was somewhat inquisitive, and it was making Brinepaw uncomfortable. He hadn't told anybody about the strange powers he'd discovered, and he didn't plan to. He wasn't even sure they were real. They could be just another product of his overactive imagination.

Whatever the case, Brinepaw wasn't about to reveal his secret to Covestorm.

He dropped the fish on the sand. "Can you take these back?" he asked, "I want to fish some more."

Something about the way Covestorm looked at him made Brinepaw feel guilty. "We're nearly there," the smoke tabby pointed at the camp with his tail, "Can't you take them back yourself?"

Brinepaw shook his head. "I want to fish some more," he repeated.

"You can fish after you've delivered your prey to the fresh-kill pile."

When Brinepaw just stood there with his paws planted in the sand, Covestorm sighed.

"Don't be long," the warrior grunted reluctantly, bending down to scoop up his apprentice's prey.

Before his mentor could change his mind, Brinepaw turned and trotted away. He felt bad about lying to Covestorm, but he had no choice but to keep quiet. No cat would believe what he had to say, especially when he could scarcely believe it himself. He bounded up the beach to the grass, allowing its wetness to cool off his legs.

Ever since the gathering, it had been overwhelmingly hot. Brinepaw's clanmates frequently went to swim in the ocean as a way of escaping the rising newleaf temperatures.

But there were no cats in the water today. Some of the other apprentices were still off hunting with their mentors, and the rest of the clan was busy in camp. The shore was peaceful and undisturbed.

Brinepaw found a spot faraway from TideClan camp and sat down. He was beside the mouth of the border stream, where its freshwater was discharged into the salty brine of the ocean. The stream bed was lined with hundreds of flat, smooth stones and encased in spongy grass on either bank. He watched as the clear ripples of the creek danced over stones and twisted around branches before they finally entered the sea. The harsh sunlight was broken by the water into what looked like a thousand golden shards.

Brinepaw found suddenly that he'd been lost in thought. He got to his paws and shook out his hickory coat.

He went to the edge of the beach and let the shallow water lap at his feet. He spread his toes and closed his eyes gently, breathing in a long gulp of air. He could feel the ocean tugging at his fur and enveloping his thoughts. He felt around his mind and sensed the long, slender body of a fish. It wagged back and forth in the waves ahead of him, dipping and bobbing as it swam.

Brinepaw concentrated on the sensation of the fish against the

current of the water. In that moment, he wasn't just standing in the ocean. He *was* the ocean.

His bronze eyes shot open. There was the fish, floating in front of his face, suspended in the air by a sphere of water. Its silver scales glimmered miraculously in the light. Brinepaw took a step forward and pushed his muzzle into the sphere. He clasped the fish in his jaws and bit down hard.

Even though he'd done it many times before, Brinepaw was still surprised at his own abilities. He'd spent the last few days exploring his power, but it would take moons to adjust completely. And he couldn't blame Covestorm for being suspicious. All the warriors knew Brinepaw as the most incompetent apprentice in the den. Now, suddenly, he was taking home heaps of prey at a time.

I can't keep this up forever, Brinepaw realized, *Covestorm is going to want to see how I catch them eventually. And if that's the case... I need to learn how to actually hunt.*

He caught five more fish using the same method, stacking them neatly in a pile. Then he returned to the shallows and located a school of minnows. They flitted to and fro underwater, fleeing whenever Brinepaw got close. He paused and held still, waiting long enough for the minnows to return to him.

Swiftly, he bent his head down and snapped his muzzle shut. His teeth closed around emptiness and he came up with nothing but salty water dripping from his chin.

Brinepaw did his best to shake off his disappointment and he tried again. And again. And once more.

Finally, he was ready to give up. He waded back to dry land and gathered his pile. The six fish swung in his mouth all the way back to camp.

He left his contribution on the fresh-kill pile. Brinepaw felt eyes on him and he turned to see Sagecloud beaming proudly at him. She was seated in the shade of a large oak tree that grew next to the warriors' den. Rainflight, Heronstrike and Skymask were with her.

Brinepaw's face burned with embarrassment and he slunk away to the apprentices' den.

The cave was dark and chilly, offering some shelter from the scorching sun. Brinepaw found that Milkpaw and Bunnypaw were inside, lying apart from each other to keep cool. They had tossed their moss nests aside and were lying against the bare rock. Brinepaw avoided stepping on their tails as he made his way to his bed.

Milkpaw lifted her head, "Brinepaw!"

He ignored her and settled into his nest, fatigue suddenly washing over his body.

But Milkpaw was undeterred. She crawled closer to him and blinked her big blue eyes. "How was the hunting?" she asked eagerly.

"Fine," Brinepaw set his chin down on the cold floor of the den.

"You've been catching an awful lot of food lately," Milkpaw was grinning, "I bet Covestorm's thinking about assessing you early."

Brinepaw could tell he intrigued her, and he hated it. He hated how she looked at him with such interest, almost as if she were trying to decipher him. Brinepaw sniffed, "I doubt it."

"I don't," said Milkpaw. She placed her pure white paw on Brinepaw's mottled one and gave him an encouraging glance.

Brinepaw got up abruptly. "I have to go."

He hurried out of the den, hopping over Bunnypaw's sleeping body as he went.

Suddenly Brinepaw was feeling very sick. The water shrew he'd eaten that morning turned around in his stomach. He searched the camp desperately for Burnetpaw. At last he spotted his friend at the edge of camp, Almondstar at his side and two mice dangling from his jaws.

He waited for Burnetpaw to drop his mice on the pile before heading over. "Nice catch," he said rather plainly, then he dipped his head to his leader, "Hello, Almondstar."

"Brinepaw," Almondstar's long white and russet fur was stunning in the bright sun, "I trust you've been recovering well from the storm?"

Brinepaw nodded.

"Good," the she-cat replied, "I'm counting on you, Brinepaw. Covestorm's been telling me about your impressive hunting capabilities. We need that kind of skill in our clan."

The young apprentice was somewhat shocked to hear such praise from his leader. He couldn't think of anything to say before Almondstar walked off and disappeared into the shadows of her den.

"Woah," Burnetpaw breathed, "She's never, *ever* complimented me like that. And I'm her apprentice."

"It's not a big deal," Brinepaw responded, shrugging.

Brinepaw worried that Burnetpaw would be upset by Almondstar's misplaced flattery, but the red tabby seemed to forget it rather quickly. He opened his hazel eyes wide and declared gleefully, "You'll never believe what Bluepaw told me today!"

"What?" Brinepaw inquired, though he wasn't very interested in Burnetpaw's answer. His friend had a way of getting along with all of their clanmates, but Brinepaw wasn't very fond of Bluepaw.

"He said that Milkpaw has a crush on him!" Burnetpaw was getting excited now; he grabbed a plump vole from the pile and began munching on it loudly.

"That's not true!" Brinepaw gasped, taken aback.

Burnetpaw cocked his head, "What do you mean?"

Brinepaw got control of himself and lowered his voice, "Milkpaw has a crush on *me*."

His friend twitched his whiskers, and Brinepaw could tell that he didn't believe him. But Burnetpaw tried to act convinced to spare his feelings. "Really?" he asked in an overplayed, squeaky voice, "How do you know?"

"I can just tell," Brinepaw grumbled, taking a mouthful of his friend's meal without asking for permission.

"Well," Burnetpaw meowed, "Good for you. She's pretty."

Brinepaw wanted to tell him that he was wrong. That she *wasn't* pretty and that it *wasn't* a good thing because it was complicating his life. But he just clamped his mouth shut and frowned at the sand beneath him. He was surprised at how much he cared that Burnetpaw know that Bluepaw wasn't the one she liked. Why did it even matter?

Any normal cat would've realized that Brinepaw was bitter and changed the subject. But Burnetpaw had always been the kind of cat to push a topic until it became extremely uncomfortable. Despite his undeniable talent at making friends, he could be pretty socially daft at times. "So," he said, "Do *you* like *her?"*

"No," Brinepaw said. He thought back to the conversation he'd had with Milkpaw in the den. He remembered how aggravating she was and how she always seemed to be analyzing him.

"Fine," Burnetpaw rolled his eyes.

Brinepaw was satisfied to find that he'd bored Burnetpaw enough for the conversation to shift again. They talked about training and the gathering and their warrior assessments. Eventually the sun was dipping into the waves and long shadows were cast onto the earth.

Brinepaw had forgotten where he was. As he woke up from his daze, he noticed how calm he was. It was unusual, but very nice all the same. Even when his mind was racing, Burnetpaw had this inexplicable gift to slow everything down. Brinepaw let out a content sigh as he lay there, listening to his friend and soaking up the rare moment of peace. How soon would it be before the chaos of his life ensued once again? How long would this quiet last?

When Burnetpaw was finished, the two toms noticed they had nothing left to talk about. There was space to ponder without being interrupted. They remained like this for quite some time before Brinepaw stretched and stood up.

"There's something I need to show you," Brinepaw murmured.

"Okay," Burnetpaw sounded hesitant, but he followed Brinepaw anyway and the two of them left camp and walked to where the ocean met the land.

It was nearly dark. Brinepaw peered past Burnetpaw's figure and into camp. The dusk patrol was leaving, but there were no other cats outside. He waited until Cedarfrost, one of the clan's senior warriors, led the patrol away before he turned his attention back to Burnetpaw.

"You're kind of freaking me out," Burnetpaw admitted, glancing over his shoulder to try and locate what Brinepaw was staring at. When he could see nothing but the dusk patrol fading away in the opposite direction, he looked back at his friend, "Now, what was it you wanted to show me?"

Brinepaw plopped his hindquarters onto the sand. "You have to promise not to freak out."

"I already *said* I was freaking out," Burnetpaw scoffed, drawing his pink tongue over his right forepaw, "So I can't really promise anything."

"You have to promise not to say anything."

"About *what?"*

Burnetpaw's face dropped as his eyes flickered to the bulb of water that was rising behind Brinepaw. The bubbling sphere hovered there, completely controlled without Brinepaw even facing it.

"What's going on?" Burnetpaw backed up a few steps, his eyes shining with disbelief, "Are *you* doing that?"

Brinepaw brought the water over to them. It floated there, then

morphed into a thin stream that travelled around Burnetpaw's face and then through his legs. It ascended into the air, higher and higher until finally Brinepaw let go and little droplets of seawater showered the apprentices' pelts.

Burnetpaw shook the drops from his fur and bounced up to his friend, "This is amazing!" he exclaimed, "How did it happen?"

There it was. The question that had nagged at Brinepaw ever since he'd fought those WaveClan apprentices. He tilted his head to the sky and tried to see all the way into the deepness of the night.

"I don't know," he said, "I just got lost in the storm and I haven't been the same since."

six

The two toms made their way back to camp, bumping shoulders as they walked. Neither of them said a word, although Burnetpaw was muttering in shock to himself. Brinepaw could feel his friend's body shaking with excitement. He scuffed the sand and watched it fly up in front of him and disappear into the dark. The waves were slapping the shore behind them, swelling onto the beach before falling away again. Brinepaw listened to their music and allowed a harsh, evening wind to pass through his fur.

Something about the silence between them felt wrong, so he searched for something more to say.

"There were some WaveClan apprentices on our territory the other day."

Burnetpaw stopped walking. "What?"

Brinepaw swallowed as he relived the terrifying experience. "Three apprentices," he explained, "Nightpaw, Lavenderpaw, and Lilypaw, I think. They were deliberatly tresspassing on TideClan land, so I challenged them. I seriously thought I was going to die. But then I started controlling the water. Without even meaning to, I controlled it. I thought I was imagining it." His breathing was starting to quicken and his bronze eyes were alight with panic.

"Hey," Burnetpaw rested his tail on Brinepaw's spine, "It's okay. You weren't imagining it."

Brinepaw gulped and nodded slowly. "But that's not all," he said painfully, "I accidentally hurt one of the apprentices. He was bleeding. Unconcious. The others took him back, but I'm not sure they could save him. He looked bad, Burnetpaw. Real bad."

He could tell that he'd said too much. Burnetpaw turned towards the ocean with darkness in his eyes. His face was clouded and sad. His friend's russet tabby pelt looked dull and gray in the dim light,

the color of dry coral nestled in the sand of an open beach. Another gust of wind passed, but this one was much stronger and icy cold. Burnetpaw shivered, and at last he spoke.

"Great StarClan, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw bowed his head in shame.

To his surprise, Burnetpaw got back on his paws and nudged him with the crest of his head, "Well, no use in moping about that," he said, "Let's just go get some rest."

The way back to their den way dizzy and muddled. Brinepaw still wasn't sure how Burnetpaw had dismissed the situation so easily. He wobbled on his paws as they arrived outside of the apprentices' den. Everything around him appeared murky and blurred; the edges of the Red Cliff were soft and blended seamlessly into the ground, and the normally corase, multi-colored grains of sand had morphed into one gigantic, silken blanket of gentle beige. In Brinepaw's anxious, overtired state, the sand blanket seemed to ripple underneath him.

Burnetpaw paused halfway through the entrance and glanced back at Brinepaw's blank expression. "Are you going to be okay?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," Brinepaw answered, his eyes still struggling to focus on what was in front of him, "I-I think I'm just going to walk around for a while."

"Okay," said Burnetpaw, "But let me first just offer you some advice. Don't worry too much about things you don't even know to be true. For all we know, that WaveClan apprentice could be alive and well."

When Brinepaw didn't reply, Burnetpaw sighed and headed into the den to sleep.

Brinepaw took off, heading west. He was certain there was someone, or something, chasing him. He could hear paws on the dirt behind him. He could see a racing shadow out of the corner of

his vision. He could feel hot breath on his neck. He needed to run, he was sure of it. If he didn't, he would die, and the pain would be unbearable. But, he realized, the pain already *was* unbearable so did it really matter in the end? Was it better to just stop living now? He decided that it was.

The world seemed to be moaning. The wind had surged to become a huge force of cool, unpredictable currents. The forest off to his left creaked as tree limbs bent and split. The sea off to his right was growing into high tide with astounding speed. Angry waves crashed into rocks and earth, their crystal-colored remnants splattering Brinepaw's face. The water dripped into his eyes and everything became a mess of varied shapes and colors, but Brinepaw allowed his nose to lead the way. He jumped across the rushing ocean stream and continued running as the land began to transform into the place where he would die.

The shoreline sloped upward and became a rocky mountainside. Brinepaw scrabbled along, panting now. He pulled a stream of water from the tides beneath and used it to the clear boulders and shrubs in his path. The water sliced through branches and thorns and rolled huge stones off the cliffside into the raging ocean. Brinepaw noticed the roots of a beech tree sticking up out of the dirt, so he raised his forepaw and swiped the water down across the root system, tearing them away from the ground. The entire tree collapsed, its dismantled roots now raised in the air like claws scraping the black sky.

He grunted as he cleared the tree trunk with a powerful leap and landed safely on the other side. He skidded to a halt at the top of the cliff and dropped the water back into the sea, watching as it fell for a long time before finally hitting the water's surface and sending up a spray of droplets.

[image]

It was a long drop down. Only the wind made noise as Brinepaw crept to the edge and peered over. Far beneath him, a tangle of waves surged to meet the base of the cliff. Brinepaw's toes curled over the cliff and gripped it hard.

Urgency flooded into his veins and he felt suddenly that it was time.

He squeezed his eyes shut and hurled himself over the side of the cliff.

"You didn't have to do that, you know."

Brinepaw opened his eyes warily. He was lying on his side against a mound of moist sand. Water touched his paws as they trailed into the ocean. He was looking out towards the horizon, where the dark sky collided with the even darker sea. Rocks partly obscured his view of the moon and stars. Brinepaw realized that he was lying in the sheltered cove that was carved into the base of the cliff.

A puddle of rusty blood was pooling in front of him, its metallic smell stinging his nostrils.

He tried to lift his head to find the source of the voice, but pain shot through his body and forced him to lay still.

"Don't hurt yourself," the voice whispered, "I'll come to you."

A large, translucent cat padded into view.

Brinepaw curled his lip, "Go away," he snarled weakly, "Leave me alone."

"I'm not going to do that."

"I just want it to stop. I want the visions to stop and the fear and the dread and everything that makes me hate living so much," Brinepaw stared directly at the strange cat and tried to communicate his hopelessness.

The cat looked sad. Very sad. Brinepaw could tell by his voice that he was a tom, but aside from that his identity was a mystery. His pelt was too clear and glasslike to reveal anything about his appearance.

"Just let me die," Brinepaw pleaded, choking on a sob, "Please just let me die."

There was genuine sorrow brimming at the edges of the strange cat's colorless eyes.

"I pity you," rumbled the mysterious warrior, "But I cannot let you die."

Brinepaw stamped the rocks with his tail, "Why not?" he cried, "Why am I still here? Please, please, please oh no oh no oh no oh no—"

"Quiet!" the odd tom shouted, taking a step towards Brinepaw, "You cannot die just yet. You're important, Brinepaw. You're *vital*."

"For what?" Brinepaw flexed his claws as he continued to lay, stiffly, on the shadowy beach.

The transparent cat looked away frustratedly, "I... don't know. I forget." His mouth was set in a firm line like he was thinking hard.

Brinepaw's side ached as he let out a huff of laughter, "You forgot? I can't believe this. A figment of my imagination comes to me to remind me that I'm important but has forgotten why. Incredible."

"I'm not a figment of your imagination!" growled the tom.

Brinepaw snorted, "Then what are you? A StarClan warrior?"

"No," said the tom, "Not yet, anyway."

"Right," Brinepaw meowed sarcastically, "Let's start with your name, then. Can you tell me that, at least?"

Silence. Uncertain, hazy eyes.

"You don't even know your own name."

The tom shook his head, "I'm not sure. Look, all I know is that I'm here to help you," he lashed his feathery tail, "I just wish I could remember why, or how."

"This is all very entertaining," grumbled Brinepaw, who was beginning to lose his patience, "But if you could shut up now I'd be quite appreciative. I'd like to die in peace."

He watched his blood gush from his body, stirring the puddle that had already formed. He coughed as he accidentally inhaled a splash of saltwater. Death was approaching quickly now.

But just as he was beginning to fade away, the water at his paws started to glow.

Brilliant turquoise plants came to life underneath the ocean's surface. Purple, orange and yellow corals were illuminated and exposed by the light. Bioluminescent seaweed shone just beneath the moving waves. Everything that slept in the sea seemed to be waking up all at once.

The blood was washed away and sunk into the colorful, frothy swells.

Brinepaw felt his wounds close up inexplicably. The sensation of imminent death slipped away.

"No," he breathed raggedly, glaring at the mysterious tom through piercing copper eyes.

"You will thank me," he vowed, turning his milky figure away and padding across the open water. The glowing plants had disappeared, leaving nothing but an empty waterscape of shadow.

As Brinepaw slowly stood up, the tom began to dematerialize. Just before he faded completely, he turned back to face Brinepaw.

"Call me Ghost," he purred, and then he was gone.

Brinepaw was left to deal with himself in the stillness of the night. There he was, still alive. And that was what he hated most about living. Being alive.

He swam to shore and limped tiredly to the top of the beach, his soggy tail dragging behind him. There, he stopped to look out across the sea. The treachery of the night seemed to have dwindled.

Surprisingly, he didn't feel the need to climb the cliff again. He only wanted to get back to camp.

He took his time, inspecting flowers and clumps of grass and even stopping to stalk a sparrow that was hopping around. He missed the catch, but it was a welcome distraction from the events that had transpired. After all, his mind kept trailing back to Ghost. Who *was* he? And what did he want?

The rocks of TideClan camp came into view at last. Brinepaw had never been more relieved to see them. He wanted nothing more than to sink into a deep slumber and forget everything.

He snuck towards the camp on light feet, sniffing the brisk air to check for any cats that might see him return. There was only one scent.

Fleetwater.

Brinepaw backed away and sunk into the grass, hiding.

His father's silhouette was up ahead. He was seated at the border of the camp, watching the territory ahead of him with amber eyes that were narrowed to slits.

Brinepaw waited, hoping that Fleetwater would abandon his watch and go back to his den.

Instead, the smokey black warrior got up and shook out his fur. He rotated his tufted ears, his expression thoughtful. Then, he bounded forward and jumped to land right in front of Brinepaw.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Fleetwater snapped, baring his teeth.

Brinepaw was horribly startled. He flattened his ears down and whimpered, "I-I'm sorry, Fleetwater, I just needed some fresh air."

"Save your breath, kit," Fleetwater retorted, getting nearer, "You're pathetic. A nuisance. Don't you see how disappointing you are? Ever since you were born, kit. Your mother and I debated throwing you to the gulls."

Brinepaw's heart leaped, "That's not true," he mewled softly.

Fleetwater grinned, "Of course it's true. Don't believe me? Go ask Sagecloud. She'll tell you what an ugly little thing you were. A puny, hairless, meek little kitten. We knew right from the start you'd never make us proud."

"Stop," Brinepaw's voice was barely audible.

"And now," continued Fleetwater, "Now you're the stupidest apprentice in the den. You spend all day acting like you're afraid of your own shadow. You can't hunt, fight, track, climb, jump, anything. You can't do *anything*."

"Stop," Brinepaw repeated.

"You're not even my *son*," Fleetwater's meow was low.

Brinepaw braced himself.

Fleetwater's paw came down on the side of his head and sent him to the dirt. A ringing filled his ears as the second blow came, then the third. Then Fleetwater had him by the neck, his needle-like fangs wrapped around Brinepaw's throat.

"You will *never* be my son."

He could have killed him so easily, right there. But just like all the times before, Fleetwater released him at the last second and hurried away. Brinepaw gasped as he sat up and watched his father slink into the warriors' den.

Ever so gradually, his breathing evened out. He stared broodingly at the mouth of the warriors' den. He allowed himself enough time to reach a point where he could imagine going to bed as if nothing had ever happened; something he'd done many times before. Calmly, Brinepaw went to the apprentices' den and ambled inside.

Hatred and terror coursed within him as he passed all the sleeping bodies and curled up in his nest to sleep. He could not close his eyes for a long time. They remained open, fixed on the entrance while his mind dreamed up all the horrible things that could come

through the gap.

"I will not thank you," Brinepaw said aloud, picturing Ghost's misty face, "I will *never* thank you for saving my life."

His words fell away to silence without ever being heard.

seven

The next morning was foggy. Brinepaw could feel the humidity weighing down on his fur as he exited the apprentices' den. The camp was completely enshrouded in white. Brinepaw could hear the ocean, but he could not see it beyond the thick fog. He waddled tiredly over to the fresh-kill pile. His muscles were sore. His mind flashed back to the top of the cliff.

He was standing there, at its edge. His inhales were ragged and sharp around the edges. The waves roared beneath him, hungry for blood.

Then he was falling, falling, falling. And everything else was a blur. The pain he felt upon impact, crashing into the depths of the sea. Being pressed against craggy boulders and then thrown into the sand. Ghost's illusory body and face, summoning vivid colors to paint the otherwise gray water's surface.

Then his return to camp and Fleetwater's cruel grin. A raised paw. Contact. Dizziness and pain.

Brinepaw was shaking now. He'd paused at the fresh-kill pile to choose something to eat, but his vision was obscured by nerves. He heard pawsteps approaching from behind. He wanted to run but he was frozen to the spot.

"Hey, are you okay?"

It was Burnetpaw.

"Yes," Brinepaw told him, breathing a sigh of relief. He rounded on his friend and tried to abandon his unpleasant feelings. "Want to share some prey with me?" he offered, doing his best to smile.

Burnetpaw gave him an affectionate nudge, "Sure."

They chose a red-furred squirrel from the pile and settled down to

feast. Brinepaw realized that despite not eating much the previous day, he wasn't very hungry. He picked at the squirrel politely, but he allowed Burnetpaw to eat the majority of the meal. They didn't speak again until their food had been reduced to a pile of bones and a few thin scraps of meat.

Burnetpaw licked his chops, "Delicious," he purred.

Brinepaw would have nodded if he'd been listening, but he was gazing thoughtlessly into the mist.

He felt Burnetpaw prod his side, "Are you *sure* you're okay?"asked his friend, his words fringed with concern.

"I'm fine," Brinepaw responded, his voice barely even a whisper.

"Okay," said Burnetpaw, sounding unconvinced.

Together they watched as Fawnpaw passed with Sandfire. They were headed in the direction of the forest, presumably on their way to search for herbs. Fawnpaw blinked kindly as she went by, but Brinepaw refused to look at her.

Cool fog crept over the flat sand and descended upon them. Burnetpaw was squinting through the blanket of pearly moisture and smiling contentedly to himself.

"Where are the others?" Brinepaw questioned, remembering that the den had been empty when he'd left.

"Training," Burnetpaw replied without looking over at him, "Heronstrike took Milkpaw to the Saltwater Elm for some climbing lessons. And I think Bluepaw went to train with Bunnypaw and Robindust."

"Why?"

Burnetpaw shrugged, "Rainflight is busy, I guess."

"I'll bet Rainflight just didn't want to deal with that annoying furball," Brinepaw scoffed.

"Bluepaw's an okay cat, Brinepaw. Maybe if you actually gave him a chance, you would like him."

An awkward silence fell between them. Brinepaw was burning underneath his pelt. He wanted to say more, but he held his tongue. Burnetpaw would never understand. He got along so effortlessly with everyone. He didn't know what it was like to be the outcast.

"Brinepaw!"

Brinepaw whipped his head around to see Covestorm trotting towards him in the fog. His black stripes looked like tree branches in the cloudiness of camp. He halted in front of the two apprentices, his head bent over in exhaustion and his sides heaving.

"What is it?" Brinepaw's eyes were inquisitive.

"There's a WaveClan patrol at the border," Covestorm answered, "They're asking for you and they won't go away."

The air was tense. Brinepaw could feel Burnetpaw stiffen beside him.

"There must be some mistake," Burnetpaw started, glancing warily at Brinepaw, "Why would they want to speak to an apprentice?"

Covestorm flicked his tail, "They refuse to tell us anything." There was frustration burning at the back of his voice as he studied Brinepaw through cold, orange and gold irises. Brinepaw stared back at him. Covestorm didn't blink. "Come along, Brinepaw," he meowed.

"But he didn't do anythi—"

"It's okay, Burnetpaw," Brinepaw mewed as calmly as he could manage. He stood and shook out his oat brown fur. "Very well," he said, "Take me to them."

Even though he was very clearly exhausted, Covestorm wasted no time in heading back to the border. He hurried along, running so fast that Brinepaw had a hard time keeping up, even on fresh legs. They raced out of camp and into the fields.

There were seagulls overhead. Some were pure white, others a spotted gray. They stretched their delicate feathers into beautiful wings and sailed high on the tangy breeze. Brinepaw craned his neck to observe them as he ran. They were playful, dipping down and falling away on the wind before reconvening to fly together again. Their tails spread to form fluffy, cream-colored fans that fluttered up and down in the current.

Their sleek bodies camouflaged so well in the low hanging clouds that they seemed to disappear for a moment and then reappear in a different part of the sky. They were a part of the fog. Pale, concentrated moisture just floating through the air.

Covestorm was not talking. He'd not said a word since they left the camp. Brinepaw tore his eyes away from the seagulls and looked ahead of him. Covestorm's gray and black tail whisked behind him as his paws pounded the earth. Brinepaw could not see his face, but he was sure it was very serious.

The largely built apprentice put on a burst of speed and arrived beside his mentor. Sure enough, Covestorm's expression was steely and unsmiling. His muscles rippled underneath his fur as they galloped over the plains, flying past rocks and patches of flattened grass.

Suddenly Covestorm spoke, "Do you know what they want?"

Even though there was no one else around, it was unclear whom he was talking to. He delivered the question more like a statement, and he didn't even glance Brinepaw's way as he said it.

"I'm not sure," Brinepaw responded carefully.

Covestorm frowned. "If you do," he said, "You ought to tell me. Maybe I can help."

"What makes you think I need help?" Brinepaw countered.

His mentor did not answer right away. His expression turned pensive.

"I'm not *saying* you need help," he said at last, "I'm only saying that

if you did, I would be here for you."

Brinepaw's throat clogged with panic. He forced it down.

"So," Covestorm continued, "Let say, hypothetically of course, you were to get into some trouble with an enemy clan. That's something you could confide in me."

The border stream was visible now, but only as a dark blur that cut through the fog.

Brinepaw tasted the air and caught a whiff of TideClan scent. Just beyond it, he could smell WaveClan, too.

"I promise, Covestorm, if I needed your help, I would ask for it."

A flash of hurt slid over Covestorm's expression, but he hid it quickly and returned to his usual stony face. Guilt pierced Brinepaw like slashing claws. He contemplated saying something more, something to cushion the blow, but they'd arrived.

Cedarfrost, Sunclaw, and Baycrash were sitting on the bank of the stream. On the other side were six WaveClan cats. Brinepaw scanned through them, recognizing the WaveClan deputy, Duskwing, at the head of the patrol. Four of the others were warriors that he didn't know by name, but the last cat was an apprentice.

He had black tabby fur and a lithe body. His searing hazel eyes were filled with anger.

Nightpaw!

Brinepaw felt a cool wave of relief wash over him.

Covestorm led Brinepaw over to their clanmates and together they sat down. Baycrash nodded at him with a slight smile, but Sunclaw and Cedarfrost looked very stern. There was so much depth to Cedarfrost's blue-gray eyes. The senior warrior looked expectant. Agitated, even. Brinepaw fixed his gaze on the rushing stream and the fog that traveled across its crystal clear surface.

There they were. Two clans, divided only by the water of a stream.

Duskwing turned his ash brown body to look at Nightpaw.

"Yes," Nightpaw said, "That's him." He bared his teeth and stared disgustedly at Brinepaw.

Brinepaw took a few paces forward. "Nightpaw," he mewed gleefully, "I'm so happy you're okay."

Nightpaw jumped back from the edge of the brook. "Stay back, freak!" he hissed.

"What exactly is going on here?" Cedarfrost mewed, bemused.

"My apprentice seems to think that Brinepaw here has, erm, *powers,* of a sort." Duskwing kneaded the ground with his chocolate brown paws as he spoke. The deputy appeared somewhat embarrassed to be passing on Nightpaw's claim, as if he didn't quite believe the rumors himself.

It was Covestorm who spoke next. "That preposterous!" he exclaimed, bounding up to join Brinepaw.

Duskwing sighed, "I thought so too," he admitted, "But when Lavenderpaw and Lilypaw brought him home..."

One of the WaveClan warriors padded over to Nightpaw's side. His inky eyes were so dark that his pupils were barely visible. "He was half-drowned," the WaveClan tom recalled, "Bloody and battered and hardly breathing. He nearly *died*."

Brinepaw's bright bronze eyes flickered over briefly to look at Nightpaw. The slate-furred apprentice had dried blood stuck to his rear legs. His eyes were distant and his paws shuffled nervously at the edge of the creek.

"Please, Brambleshadow, that's enough," Duskwing said as he raised a paw. The tomcat—Brambleshadow—bowed his head. Brinepaw observed his dark tabby pelt and realized suddenly that he was Nightpaw's father.

"I don't understand," Covestorm looked troubled, "How did this happen?"

The fog had thickened even further. It crept over the rolling hills and flooded the area. Brinepaw strained to make out the figures of the cats around him. He felt faint and disoriented as he considered his options. He could either come clean and tell the truth, or fabricate some lie that Nightpaw would tear apart in a matter of seconds.

Without meaning to, he let out a heavy breath that prompted everyone to look at him. They waited. Brinepaw understood that he was meant to say something.

But what *could* he say?

"I found Nightpaw, Lavenderpaw, and Lilypaw trespassing on our territory," Brinepaw explained, surveying the crowd. "I threatened them but they wouldn't leave. So I took them on in battle. I was outnumbered, obviously, and I was losing badly. But then..."

Ten pairs of eyes focused intently on him. Covestorm blinked in confusion.

He couldn't! He couldn't reveal his secret! Not now, right here, in front of an enemy clan! It was too much. Brinepaw felt like he was enclosed in a tiny cave. He started losing air. He was trapped. He tried to move but he couldn't. He tried to remember how to breathe but it was impossible.

He was at the top of the cliff again. He was running along the shore of black, crispy bodies. He was underneath Fleetwater's big paws. He was in the den with Milkpaw and her probing questions. He was at the gathering, lost in the sea of rainwater.

"Then I remembered a move that Covestorm taught me," Brinepaw's gaze flitted over to his mentor's anxiously as he finished his thought, "And I fought them off. I didn't mean to hurt Nightpaw, really. But I feared for my life."

"Liar!" Nightpaw cried, unsheathing his claws and ripping up

clumps of grass.

"Quiet, Nightpaw!" Duskwing ordered, "We are not here to start a fight."

Nightpaw didn't listen. "Tell the truth!" he snarled, lashing his long tail.

"I *am* telling the truth," Brinepaw insisted.

Nightpaw bolted across the stream and lunged for him. Brinepaw readied himself, falling back on his haunches and allowing his claws to slide out of their sockets. The WaveClan apprentice bowled him over and the two cats rolled through the swathe of fog in a flurry of teeth and claws.

The WaveClan warriors darted over the water to pull Nightpaw out of the fight. Meanwhile, Covestorm led the TideClan cats to Brinepaw's aid. Somewhere amid the chaos, a battle broke out.

Brinepaw fought the urge to use his abilities, but he could feel himself losing early on. Nightpaw struck blow after blow. Soon, hot blood dripped down Brinepaw's cheek. He fell onto his back and saw Nightpaw's gnashing teeth above him. He kicked frantically with his back paws and writhed back and forth to free himself.

When at last he slipped out of the other tom's grasp, Brinepaw limped away. But Nightpaw latched onto his back and yanked him back into the dirt. Brinepaw yelped as he crashed down onto his belly.

Nightpaw fastened his jaws around Brinepaw's head.

"Do it," Nightpaw taunted, "Use your powers. Show them what a liar you are."

Brinepaw dragged himself across the ground, Nightpaw still secured to his back. Caterwauls came from every direction. Ahead of him, Brinepaw could see Cedarfrost fending off two WaveClan toms. Over the stream, Baycrash was pinned to the ground and Sunclaw was held back by Duskwing.

He could smell the blood.

Brinepaw flipped onto his back, knocking Nightpaw off. Then, he jumped to his feet and searched desperately for Covestorm. He located him in the shallows of the stream, pinned under the water by two WaveClan cats. His opponents' pelts were spattered with blood, but they had no wounds. The water around Covestorm's body was dark red.

Brinepaw sprang up on his hind legs, flailing his forepaws in front of his face. Water shot up from the stream and sent the two WaveClan warriors skirting backwards. There was shock on their faces as they lost their balance and tumbled over. Covestorm remained underwater, motionless.

Nightpaw had recovered now. He was sitting up a few tail-lengths away with his hazel eyes opened wide.

Brinepaw ignored the other apprentice and scampered over to his mentor. He ducked his head under the water, grabbed Covestorm's scruff, and pulled him onto the bank.

The battle raged on. Brinepaw felt helpless as he stood there, bent over Covestorm's lifeless, tattered frame. His mentor's normally pristine tabby fur was slicked down by a revolting combination of mud and pus. His wounds oozed blood that stunk of death and seeped down into the soil. But most troubling of all were the horrible sounds that came from the warrior's lungs.

He was still holding on. Air rattled in and out of his body, but just barely. With each breath, Covestorm shook violently. Brinepaw felt a whine escape his chest. He pounded the ground with his paws. He shoved his nose into Covestorm's filthy pelt.

Don't leave me.

There was water sloshing around inside of Covestorm's body. Brinepaw could hear it. He pressed an ear to Covestorm's side.

There it was again!

Nightpaw appeared nearby, but his stance wasn't hostile. Instead,

he looked oddly merciful. There was pity in his eyes.

Suddenly, everything was quiet. The warriors had stopped fighting upon realizing that Covestorm was hurt. Now, they gathered in a circle around Brinepaw. The TideClan cats wore horrified, mournful expressions. The two warriors that had injured Covestorm plodded over with their tails drooping in shame. They carved a trail of darkness as they moved through the fog, their sopping wet fur clinging to their bony sides like cobweb.

It was a rather ghostly scene. Brinepaw lay with Covestorm at the focal point of the circle, his face still mashed into the tangle of his mentor's fur. A wall of fog surrounded them. The soft slopping of the border stream was strangely unsettling.

Brinepaw had narrow vision. He forgot about the other cats and about the battle. He forgot about the fog and the stream. All of his senses and all of his awareness traveled inside of Covestorm's body.

The water had flooded his lungs and blocked his windpipe. It gurgled and bubbled up and down and through him. Brinepaw knew it was there.

He closed his eyes.

The whole world held its breath. The birds stopped singing and the wind faded away. The noise of the creek was gone.

Gingerly, Brinepaw pulled the water from Covestorm's system. His mentor's jaws parted ever so slightly to allow the liquid to slip out. A thin flow of water floated out of his mouth. Brinepaw could feel the disbelieving stares of the others cutting into him as he worked. Sunclaw let out an audible gasp.

Soon, the water was pouring out. It grew and grew in volume until a huge, round sphere spun just above Covestorm's head. Brinepaw opened his eyes.

His mentor choked and sputtered. He sat up as he coughed out another puddle of water.

The misty air filled with cheers.

Brinepaw felt as though he would burst from happiness. "Thank StarClan!" he huffed, his face falling into the smooth grass.

Covestorm was dazed. He stood up on shaky paws.

Brinepaw could hear the babbling brook again and the squawks of the seagulls. He could feel the cool mist wrap around him. But his vision had not yet cleared; it remained dark and shrouded.

The WaveClan cats were all staring at Nightpaw. Nightpaw looked distraught, shell-shocked, even. "I told you," he murmured, unblinking.

Cedarfrost sat very still, only his long, chestnut-colored fur waving in the humid breeze. Baycrash was still panting from the battle, and clumps of fur had been torn from her skin. Sunclaw sat a few paces away from them, his viridescent eyes stretched in surprise.

"What happened?" Covestorm asked when he had registered his surroundings.

"Brinepaw just saved your life." Cedarfrost's voice was a rumble in his chest.

Covestorm noticed the moist grass. He turned to his apprentice, his breath catching in his throat at the sight of the levitating water.

Brinepaw gave a weak smile.

The big tabby took another moment to glance around at the circle of cats. He seemed to remember where he was. "Is what Nightpaw said... true?" Covestorm questioned, fascinated. His gaze moved slowly upwards to rest on the water. "Are these the powers he was referring to?"

"Yes." Brinepaw let the water splash onto the ground.

The group let out a collective gasp as sparkling droplets sprayed their faces.

Covestorm was beaming. His gold-flecked eyes twinkled with something Brinepaw wasn't used to. Was that... *pride?*

"Come on," his mentor purred, "We're going home."

The WaveClan cats regrouped on the other side of the border and stood to watch TideClan leave. Duskwing looked somewhat bothered.

Brinepaw felt drowsy as he walked. Covestorm stayed nearby, bumping his shoulder with every step. Normally, Brinepaw would have told him to stop, but he was too worn out to be aggravated.

Baycrash was leaning on Sunclaw. Cedarfrost was trying hard not to look at Brinepaw, but he was not succeeding. The mood was very bizarre as they trekked back to camp. Nobody wanted to say a word, and yet it felt that an entire conversation was being shared.

Brinepaw felt like a spirit walking through the cloudy terrain as Ghost's words echoed in his ears.

You cannot die just yet.

The wind picked up again and whistled through his fur.

You're important, Brinepaw. You're vital.

He was beginning to understand.

eight

Almondstar's den was larger than Brinepaw remembered. It was dark and shadowed, except for the light that came pooling in from the entrance to form a golden puddle on the floor. There was a moss-woven nest sitting against the back wall, but it was empty. Brinepaw followed Covestorm tentatively, his gaze scanning the darkness for any sign of their leader. He nearly leapt out of his fur when a pair of sharp cyan eyes appeared in the far corner of the den.

"Covestorm, Brinepaw," Almondstar purred.

Her head was turned towards them, but her body was facing away. She was crouched over a morsel of fresh-kill that sat on the cool floor. Brinepaw peeked over his mentor's shoulder and saw that it was a sparrow.

"Well?" Almondstar queried, looking back and forth between them, "What can I do for you?"

Covestorm was hesitant. He glanced at Brinepaw, who was still standing sheepishly behind him. Then he looked back at Almondstar and spoke, "There was a WaveClan patrol at the border this morning. They were asking for Brinepaw."

Almondstar turned to face them. Her shining cyan irises were inquisitive. "Go on," she said.

"Well," sighed Covestorm, "When Brinepaw got there, they were saying a lot of ridiculous things. Something about a run-in Brinepaw had with one of their apprentices... Nightpaw, I think it was. Nightpaw claimed that Brinepaw used powers to drive him and two other WaveClan cats off of our territory."

"Powers?" Almondstar tilted her head, "What *kind* of powers?"

Brinepaw could tell she was trying to suppress the shock in

her voice, but her words shook like a leaf rattling in the wind. She was no longer looking at Covestorm; now her eyes bore into Brinepaw's like a raging fire.

The large apprentice gave up hiding behind his mentor and stepped forward. "It's true, Almondstar. The day after the gathering, I found Nightpaw and some other apprentices on our land. I fought them and... well, I guess I should just show you the rest."

He turned and left the den. Covestorm and Almondstar followed slowly behind. Brinepaw headed for the beach. Each time he glimpsed over his shoulder, Almondstar wore the same placid expression. But beyond her apparent indifference, Brinepaw saw confusion and fear. Even just the implication that one of her apprentices had *powers* threatened her entire way of life. Everything she had ever known to be true was now at stake. The world was changing.

Brinepaw paused at the edge of the lapping water. The fog was gone now. The ocean was rippled slightly by the breeze, but there were no big waves today. The sky was clear and blue, only a few clouds floating lazily across the horizon. It was warm with the sun above them. The sand felt soft and pleasant underneath Brinepaw's pads. He waited patiently, taking in the natural beauty that lay in front of him.

When Almondstar arrived at the water's edge a few moments later, Brinepaw could sense her apprehension. "Okay," she mewed nervously, "Now what's all this about?"

"You'll see." Brinepaw's reply was flat. Covestorm shot him a warning glance, but Brinepaw shrugged and focused his attention on the water.

He felt rather pleased with himself. It was as if all of the strangeness he'd felt before was fading away. He understood his abilities now. He could feel the water moving in front of him. It was there for him to control.

He summoned a gigantic wave from the depths below. It rolled into itself and roared onto the shore, foam bubbling at its

crest. When he saw Almondstar's look of dismay, Brinepaw felt a smug smile creep across his lips. He brought forth another wave, then another, allowing them to spray the entire beach with little drops of saltwater.

Covestorm shook out his coat and cuffed Brinepaw over the ear. "Stop that!" he scolded.

Brinepaw snapped out of his daze. "S-Sorry," he apologized, letting the waves flatten out again. He remembered where he was. The feeling of euphoria vanished. He was empty suddenly, just like before.

Almondstar blinked her bright teal eyes. The look of dismay was gone from her face. She appeared very calm. "That was quite impressive, young Brinepaw."

Something about how even her voice was made Brinepaw's blood run cold. "You're not surprised?" he asked, a little disappointed.

"I'm very surprised," Almondstar assured him, flicking her white and russet tail, "It's not every day that an apprentice shows you he can control water with his *mind*. Who gave you this gift? Was it StarClan?"

"How should I know?" Brinepaw scoffed, ignoring another disapproving look from Covestorm, "It just kind of... happened."

Almondstar was unamused. "Things like this don't just happen, Brinepaw," she said, "There's got to be a reason."

They stood there, face to face. Almondstar's thick fur billowed in the coastal wind. Her eyes were narrowed to slits. They looked steel blue in the muted light; one of the few clouds in the sky was blocking the sun with its white, vaporous body. Her critical expression reminded Brinepaw of how Milkpaw looked at him. She was waiting for him to say something more.

"I don't know anything," insisted Brinepaw. It wasn't exactly true. He knew about Ghost and the vision and how perhaps it was

all connected under some greater purpose. But Almondstar was his leader, not his friend. He held her gaze defiantly.

Covestorm was appalled. Brinepaw could see his mentor's horrified face out of the corner of his eye.

"Almondstar," Covestorm interjected, trying to break the tension, "There's something more you should know."

Almondstar looked away from Brinepaw and nodded, "Very well, what is it?"

"There was a battle, at the border. A lot of our cats got hurt. In fact, as ashamed as I am to admit it, I nearly died. The only reason I am standing before you now is because of Brinepaw," Covestorm paused to blink gratefully at his apprentice, "He saved my life."

"What caused the battle to break out?" asked Almondstar, studying the scratches on either of their pelts.

Brinepaw spoke up, "It was because of me, Almondstar. I lied about my abilities, and Nightpaw got upset."

The leader sighed. "I see," she mewed dejectedly, "That is troubling news, indeed. Was Adderstar there?"

Covestorm shook his head, "No, but his deputy Duskwing was."

"Then I'm sure Adderstar will be hearing about this," Almondstar raised her head into the air and stared out across the sea. She seemed far away, like she'd forgotten where she was standing. She took a sharp breath in, "And that means we must be prepared for war."

A gasp escaped Covestorm's mouth. "What? But why? It was only a border skirmish."

"Don't be stupid, Covestorm," Almondstar retorted, "They know Brinepaw is able to wield water as a weapon."

"But that doesn't mean that he *will*," Covestorm pointed out.

"He just did! Don't you see what this means? Adderstar will see Brinepaw as a threat to his clan. He's always been the delicate sort, never feeling secure in his own home. That's what makes it so hard to govern in these times. He's *unhinged*, Covestorm. He's impulsive. There's no doubt in my mind that he will wage war against us. There's no doubt in my mind that he wants Brinepaw dead."

Brinepaw was spinning. All of the colors around him had faded to shades of gray. He felt sick.

"You don't know that," Covestorm growled.

"I do," said Almondstar, "I know Adderstar better than any other cat in our clan."

"But how can you be so sure?" Covestorm challenged, taking a few daring steps towards the she-cat, "What makes you think you know him so well?"

Brinepaw backed away. He flinched a little when his paws touched water, but he kept going, wading backwards into the shallows. His crisp bronze eyes widened at the scene unfolding in front of him.

Almondstar had lost all self-control. "Why can't you just trust me?" she yowled, "You never can just *trust* me, Covestorm! And still you wonder why I chose Rainflight as deputy over you!"

Covestorm grew nearer. He was still managing to remain calm, but Brinepaw could see agitation brewing beneath his stony exterior.

"Why do you *think* it was?" Almondstar continued frantically, "Because he's a better warrior than you? Of course not! I know better than that. But Rainflight *believes* in me. He believes in my leadership. *That's* the difference, Covestorm."

Brinepaw wanted to run. The pain in Covestorm's eyes was almost too much to bare. He crouched down, withdrawing into the

water and pleading for it to swallow him whole.

"I just..." Covestorm's voice was barely a whisper. He glanced over at Brinepaw, then back at Almondstar. He closed his eyes and bent his head sadly. "I just thought we had something."

There was a silence. Not the good kind of silence where everything is very still. The raw, heavy silence where a million words go unsaid. Disappointment hangs in the air like moisture. There is no joy.

After a moment, Almondstar let out a breath. Her prickling fur settled onto her back. "We did," she mewed softly, "We did have something. But things change, Covestorm. Lives go away and reunite to find that they've lost everything they once had in common."

The tabby warrior lifted his chin and stared at her. He swallowed. "I know." His voice was raspy and broken.

Almondstar nodded slowly.

"But how can you be sure about the war?" Covestorm questioned.

The big she-cat hesitated. "There's no use in lying to you, Covestorm," she said at last, "The reason I know Adderstar so well is because I was mated to him."

Covestorm was quiet.

"I'm sorry."

"And the kits?"

"They're his."

"You're telling me that my children, Aspenkit, Beechkit, and Heatherkit, are not actually mine?" Covestorm was standing rigid with his tail held high.

"Yes."

"And Dawnwind?"

Almondstar plodded over to him solemnly and looked him in the eye. "I do love her," she meowed truthfully, "And she does think that the kits are yours. But it's not true. Adderstar is their father."

"You told the clan that you found them in the woods."

"I did," Almondstar admitted, "But I was wrong to do so. And when you came to me asking if they were yours... I just had to say yes. I couldn't hurt you again."

Covestorm laughed sarcastically, "Oh, I see. Thank you *so* very much for sparing my feelings."

"I'm sorry."

"You said that already."

By now the cloud had drifted away from the sun. It was hot again. Brinepaw pulled himself up and allowed the water to drip off his chest fur. His legs, still submerged, were cool and shivery. He squinted against the harsh sunlight. The figures of Almondstar and Covestorm were blurry in the brightness.

Suddenly Covestorm was turning away. "Come on, Brinepaw," he called, "Let's go back to camp."

Brinepaw bounded out of the water. He brushed past Almondstar and joined his mentor. They left her behind as they started back to TideClan camp.

"Brinepaw!"

He stopped and turned around. Almondstar was sitting with her paws mashed into the sand.

"Tomorrow, we prepare for war."

Covestorm snorted indignantly and swept Brinepaw along with his tail. They picked up speed, trotting away from the she-cat and everything that had happened on the beach.

They ran side by side. Brinepaw kept peering over at Covestorm, but Covestorm kept his eyes locked on the terrain ahead. The land sloped upwards into camp. Brinepaw could see Burnetpaw standing with the other apprentices, who had apparently returned from training. He thought about everything he needed to explain to his best friend. Everything that had changed in the matter of a single day.

He hardly registered it when Covestorm halted abruptly and stood at the edge of camp. Brinepaw paused a few steps ahead, then padded back to meet him. "What's wrong?"

"Please don't say anything, Brinepaw. Not about me, not about Almondstar, and certainly not about Adderstar. Yes, she broke the warrior code. And yes, she lied to me about the kits. But there's no reason for the clan to know that. As far as they know, those kits are orphans abandoned in the middle of the forest. The truth isn't relevant right now. It's not going to help anything."

Brinepaw flicked a brown ear, "Don't worry, Covestorm," he meowed, "I'm not going to tell anyone."

Relief flooded his mentor's orange eyes like a waterfall flooding a pool. "Good," he replied, "Thank you."

"Of course." Brinepaw observed the tom. His whiskers were long and white, jutting off his fuzzy gray muzzle and filling the space around the defined shape of his face. He was bulky and strong, but he also appeared somewhat defeated. He was the afterthought. The brave and skillful warrior that had almost been made deputy. Almost. The handsome and charming tabby that had almost been with the one he loved. Almost. It seemed that his whole life had been spent chasing hopelessly after what he could not have.

Brinepaw saw that now. He saw where his wisdom and his guidance and his somber kindness had come from. His entire personality was wrapped up in his past. All of his behaviors could be described by what he'd gone through. Brinepaw guessed that was true of most cats.

Covestorm looked meaningfully at his apprentice. "Brinepaw," he said, "Almondstar may be right. There is a war coming. She means to train you for battle. And now that she's seen what you can do, I'm certain that she will want to use you."

"I understand."

"But I will protect you," Covestorm promised earnestly, his eyes glowing with something unrecognizable, "I don't care what Almondstar wants. I will protect you, Brinepaw. Always."

nine

Brinepaw widened his stance and braced himself as Burnetpaw came hurtling towards him. Just as the red tabby apprentice was about to reach him, Brinepaw stepped away and into the water. It was cool on his heels. He flashed a paw above his head, bringing a stream of water with it. Within moments he'd pushed Burnetpaw onto the ground.

He saw his opportunity and jumped onto Burnetpaw's side, holding him against the sand. His friend's hazel eyes were a startled blend of green and brown.

"That's enough!" Almondstar called from a few tail-lengths away, "There's no need to hurt him."

Panting, Brinepaw hopped back onto the level beach. Burnetpaw continued to lay there, completely incapacitated.

"Oh, quit being so dramatic," Brinepaw muttered as he returned to help his friend up.

Burnetpaw grumbled as Brinepaw pushed him to his feet. "Easy for you to say," he said with a shake of his fur, *"You've* never been attacked by a crazed, water-wielding fiend."

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Is that what you think of me?"

Before his friend could reply, Covestorm stepped between them. "Alright, that's enough bad-mouthing for one day. Brinepaw, why don't you take on one of the other apprentices next?"

"Sure," Brinepaw agreed, shrugging.

He turned and looked expectantly at the others. There was a long line of cats on the beach; all of the apprentices had come with their mentors to take part in the training session. Most of them were glaring at him through disapproving eyes. Rainflight was staring at

him, his jade-colored gaze narrowed. Bluepaw was at his side. Unlike his mentor, the little, blue-gray tomcat was smirking arrogantly.

Meanwhile, Burnetpaw was limping away from the water. His pelt was moist and ruffled and his footsteps were tired. He went to join Almondstar at the center of the crowd. The leader paid no attention to him as he sat down. Instead, she raised her head proudly and nodded with approval at Brinepaw.

Brinepaw looked down at his paws, shame washing through his body and down his limbs. He knew Burnetpaw would be fine, but guilt still pricked his skin like stinging nettle. And the way Almondstar had been ignoring Burnetpaw didn't help. In fact, the entire clan had been acting strangely since word had gotten out about Brinepaw's abilities. The warriors took every measure to avoid him, slinking around camp with their heads down and their fur bristling. The other apprentices had stopped talking to him entirely, except for Milkpaw and Burnetpaw.

He'd felt lonely all his life, but this was something much worse. His own mother, Sagecloud, refused to look at him. And although Fleetwater hadn't attacked him since the night he jumped off the cliff, Brinepaw was sure there was something sinister forming underneath all the silence. He could feel his anxiety spreading and intensifying with every second he was alive. It wrapped and consumed his mind. It commanded his every action.

Now, Heronstrike was padding up to him. The majestic gray tom dipped his head in greeting. He and Covestorm were some of the few warriors that could still manage to treat him normally. There was even a faint glimmer of respect hanging in Heronstrike's soft yellow gaze. Brinepaw responded with a swish of his tail and a forced smile.

"Milkpaw says she wants to fight you next." Heronstrike motioned with his nose to the creamy-furred apprentice that was standing by his shoulder.

Brinepaw looked into her eyes. They were a shallow blue that swirled with obsessive fascination. Her fluffy white fur waved

in the breeze.

"Okay," Brinepaw agreed, gulping.

They headed for the seashore. Brinepaw went reluctantly, glancing back at Covestorm. His mentor was watching him closely.

Milkpaw stopped and faced him. Brinepaw stopped a few fox-lengths further down the shoreline. There were lots of colorful shells laying half-buried in the sand. Brinepaw observed them closely until the sound of Almondstar's voice roused him from his thoughts.

"Begin!"

It was the third fight of the session. Before taking on Burnetpaw, Brinepaw had already beaten Milkpaw's sister Bunnypaw. Bunnypaw had known she was doomed from the start and had barely even tried. Robindust was not pleased.

Clearly, Milkpaw believed that she had what it took to avenge her sister. She circled him cautiously, her tail sweeping a dark, cocoa-colored path in the sand behind her. Brinepaw did not move yet. He waited for her to get close.

At last she grew impatient. There was a snowy flash and suddenly Milkpaw was on top of him. Brinepaw gasped as he was knocked onto the hard packed sand. He realized with irritation that she, like most of the apprentices, was faster than him.

He thumped his full, flowing tail against the ground. A huge rush of water emerged from the ocean and pummeled Milkpaw's flank. Milkpaw teetered back and forth slightly as she lost her balance. Brinepaw sent another surge of water to push her over completely, then leapt to his paws.

Milkpaw's normally beautiful, pure fur was now dripping wet and plastered to her scrawny frame. She looked cold and pitiful, but her eyes were flaming with rage. She bounded forward. Brinepaw readied another glistening shot of water, holding it in the air and preparing for the right moment.

It seemed that moment had arrived, so he sent it swiftly towards her, but Milkpaw was light on her toes. She sprung straight up into the air, dodging Brinepaw's attack completely. Then she fell backwards midair and kicked her hind legs. Brinepaw heard a crack as both of her back heels collided with his face in rapid succession. He staggered backwards, stunned.

Milkpaw landed flawlessly on all four paws. She puffed out her chest, her sharp fangs pressed together in a prideful grin. Brinepaw could taste blood in his mouth.

He could see right through her to the miles of smooth sand that lay beyond. She was empty inside. He remembered the disturbing flare inside of her eyes. He remembered the way she liked to study him. He remembered the way she liked to talk to him. He remembered the way she liked to stare at him for long periods of time.

He felt the last of his composure slip away. He summoned several enormous, whirling, spitting waves and threw them onto the beach. Milkpaw let out a choke of fear that fizzled out as the waves covered her head and pulled her into the sea. She appeared a few fox-lengths from land, coughing and spitting and flailing her legs. When she realized where she was, she swam desperately for shore, her legs churning vigorously underwater.

Brinepaw crouched at the water's edge and created a powerful current that dragged Milkpaw back out to sea. The tiny white apprentice squeaked meekly as her head went under.

"Stop it!" Covestorm shouted from his place among the warriors, but his words sounded like crashing waves in Brinepaw's ears.

He knew he could drown her if he wanted to. The temptation was stronger than he'd expected.

"Brinepaw, stop it now!" Covestorm ordered, dashing over to his apprentice.

Brinepaw allowed the current to disappear into the natural

flow of the tides. Then he brought forth a gentle wave to push Milkpaw to safety. Her head bobbed on the surface as she was carried to the beach and deposited on its gravely bank.

Before Covestorm could say anything more, Brinepaw pranced over to Milkpaw and bent his head over her. She was breathing. Her eyes opened slightly and to Brinepaw's amazement, he saw no anger there. She watched him as he closed his eyes and concentrated deeply. He located the remaining liquid that was caught in her throat and pulled it out carefully. She sputtered and spat out a splash of salty brine.

"Feel better?" Brinepaw asked.

"Much better, thanks," Milkpaw replied, sounding somewhat dazed.

"Good," said Brinepaw curtly, turning around and trotting back to Covestorm.

Covestorm blinked at him, astonished, "That was very irresponsible. And dangerous, too. What would you have done if she died?"

"I don't know," Brinepaw admitted, "But she didn't. That's what's important."

Covestorm lowered his voice, "What's important is that you keep these powers in check, Brinepaw. They seem to be controlling you more than you're controlling them."

He stopped speaking as Heronstrike passed by them, looking somewhat distraught. Brinepaw watched as the senior warrior bounded over to his apprentice and leaned in to talk with her. Milkpaw was sitting up now, her forepaws splayed out before her sloppily.

Brinepaw swallowed a lump in his throat. He squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry, Covestorm," he mewed faintly.

"You have to be careful," Covestorm warned.

"I know."

The onlookers were murmuring to one another. Brinepaw glanced around at the crowd of unsettled faces. He caught the eye of Burnetpaw, who shook his head sadly. Beside him, Almondstar sighed. Brinepaw couldn't bring himself to move. It felt as if all the fur had been stripped from his body, leaving him as nothing more than a flesh vessel to be looked upon and pieced together.

Bluepaw was already marching over, determination radiating off his pelt. A few steps behind, Rainflight followed quietly. The deputy appeared discouraged.

Almondstar saw what was happening and interjected quickly. "That's enough for now," she decided, bounding up to Bluepaw and holding him back, "You can have your chance tomorrow."

Bluepaw shot Brinepaw a nasty glare, then whirled around and returned to Rainflight.

"Very well," Almondstar breathed, "Good training session everybody! Heronstrike, gather a few cats for a border patrol and set out at once. Everyone else, let's hurry back to camp and get something to eat. We'll need our energy for the next couple of days."

Everyone did as they were told and began to disperse from the area. Whispers floated into the air as rumors of war were exchanged between cats. Almondstar remained where she was, her ears flapped down against her head.

Milkpaw joined Bluepaw and Rainflight to head back to camp. Brinepaw examined the length of Milkpaw's strides and determined that she was, in fact, perfectly fine.

Good, he thought solemnly, *Sure, she's annoying, but I don't think I could live with myself if her blood were on my paws.*

Finally, Almondstar followed her cats and brought up the rear of the group. Brinepaw and Covestorm were the last left on the beach.

"It's just training," Covestorm said when he was sure nobody could hear them, "You don't have to take it so seriously."

Brinepaw blinked, "I know. But it's training for *war*. Almondstar is counting on me. That's just... a lot of pressure."

"Pay no mind to what Almondstar says," Covestorm told him.

"She's my leader. And your leader too, I might add."

Covestorm laughed, "That may be true, but even leaders can be wrong. It's not right to make an apprentice carry the whole weight of war. And it's not right to rely on a single cat to do the work of thousands."

"So what do you suggest I do?" Brinepaw's voice was shaking.

Covestorm looked slightly uncomfortable, as if he weren't expecting Brinepaw to get upset. He laid his tail on his apprentice's back to steady him. "The only thing to do now is lay low and do our best to prevent this war from happening."

Brinepaw gave a short nod.

"You look tired," Covestorm smiled weakly, "Why don't you go take a rest in your den?"

"No," refused Brinepaw, "You go on ahead. I think I just need some time."

His mentor looked worried. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm fine, Covestorm. I promise."

"Okay. Come find me if you need anything."

Brinepaw watched Covestorm as he walked away and disappeared over the hill. He appreciated how much the tomcat cared for him, but he wasn't sure he could return the same affection. He wondered if he was even capable of feeling. Well, he *was,* of course. He loved his mentor, and he loved Burnetpaw, too.

At least, he thought he did.

But to what extent?

Brinepaw wasn't sure. He was never sure of anything.

He decided to smother his thoughts in the landscape. Lavender clouds rolled in over the horizon, painting the waves purple. Birdsong was carried all the way from the forest to the wide open sea. Brinepaw allowed their melodies to soothe him. He felt sleepy. His eyes closed.

There was a low, ominous boom. Brinepaw's eyes opened and everything around him had changed. The clouds darkened and flowed to block the sun. Thunder rumbled overhead. Wind whooshed through Brinepaw's fur and blew sand into his eyes. When Brinepaw tried to breathe, there was no air. The sky was clogged with a peculiar gray snow. Brinepaw realized suddenly that it wasn't snow at all. It was ash.

Glowing liquid flames poured across the land. In the distance, the forest was consumed by a wall of fire. Brinepaw's eyes shone with the orange of the burning trees. He could feel a scream building in his chest.

Just as they had the first time, the bodies appeared. Crisp, flaky black flesh. Rotting muscle stripped away from the bone. The stink of death.

Brinepaw let out a high wail. He dropped to the ground and buried his face in his forepaws. Rain came down from the sky suddenly as the clouds began to shed their weight. It was so fast and so thick that Brinepaw felt almost as if he were underwater. His entire body rattled with fear.

There was a ferocious pounding on the earth. Brinepaw peeked up over his paws to see Ghost running directly at him.

But Ghost looked different than usual.

For one thing, he was solid. His body appeared more real than ever, as if he were an actual living thing. There was no milky

light enveloping his frame. His pelt bore mottled tabby stripes, and his eyes... his eyes were a striking bronze.

That's not Ghost... that's me!

The disturbing image of himself grew nearer. Brinepaw shrieked and backed away. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. All of his blood ran cold as the other Brinepaw skidded to a halt in front of him, panting.

"Listen!" the other Brinepaw gasped, "Listen to me!"

Brinepaw tried to scream but his voice broke and gave out.

"You have to listen!" pleaded the other Brinepaw, "You have to push him in!"

Brinepaw felt like he might faint. Bile was rising from the back of his throat.

"Do you understand me? Brinepaw! Brinepaw! Do you *understand* me?"

The bile now sat on his tongue. Brinepaw shook his head feebly.

"Burnetpaw," the other Brinepaw said. His bronze eyes were searching Brinepaw's identical ones as he spoke, "You have to push him in. It's the only way."

"What do you mean?" Brinepaw cried over the sound of the rain, shrinking back onto the sand. The other Brinepaw's silhouette was surrounded by the brilliant glow of fast-approaching flames. Brinepaw glanced past him to see the strange orange liquid seeping onto the beach.

Is that... lava?

The rain harshened and began to hammer Brinepaw's back so hard it felt like claws on his spine. The other Brinepaw stared at him intensely. There was agony on his face. He looked tortured. Brinepaw realized he was looking at the only other cat in the world

that understood everything he'd been through. The only other cat in the world that had suffered like he had.

They shared a moment, each one seeing in the other what he saw in himself. The fear. Fleetwater's extended claws. The edge of the cliff.

There was a final boom and suddenly Brinepaw was on the quiet beach again. The fire, the storm, and the other Brinepaw had all disappeared. The clouds were soft and lavender again. The day was hot and pleasant.

Brinepaw was gasping, his sides inflating with the air pulled in by short, desperate breaths. He had a splitting headache. There was pressure in his chest that seemed to compress his lungs. Brinepaw bent over and pressed the crest of his head into the sand.

His body trembled as he began to cry.

ten

Several days went by. The visions stopped, but the training continued. There was scarcely a moment to rest. Brinepaw was kept outside from dawn to dusk, fighting new opponents and discovering new ways of making the water bend to his will. Covestorm had protested Almondstar's methods multiple times, but his disapproval only seemed to egg her on further.

One day, something occurred to Brinepaw.

"What if there's no water nearby when WaveClan attacks?" he asked Almondstar.

"That won't happen," his leader replied with confidence, "We will wait patiently for their siege on our camp. Then you will have the entire ocean at your disposal."

Brinepaw frowned at her, "But how can you be sure they're even coming?"

"They're coming, Brinepaw. Just wait."

And that was the end of it. Now more than ever, it seemed impossible to have a real conversation with Almondstar. Brinepaw worried that her reasoning had been affected by everything that was going on with Adderstar, but there was nothing he could do about it. He supposed she would have to find her own way out of the darkness. And when she did, maybe then she could finally resume proper leadership of TideClan.

The senior warriors were beginning to grow uneasy. Everything had changed. Otherwise perfectly normal days were tainted with the potential of war. Training their apprentices no longer meant hunting or climbing or tracking practice, it meant pitting them against one another and against Brinepaw. At this point, bloodshed between clans seemed inevitable.

Brinepaw's head spun, but he managed to pull his attention back to the session. His cloudy vision cleared to reveal Sunclaw plowing through the shallows, his green eyes flaming. Brinepaw huffed as he pushed Sunclaw back with water-swathed paws. The golden tabby warrior toppled over with a splash, his white legs flying up into the air.

"Very good!" Almondstar shouted, bounding into the waves, "That's enough for now," she told Brinepaw, "We'll end early today. Take some time to relax and allow your body to recover. You'll need your strength for tomorrow."

Brinepaw dipped his head respectfully, though his stomach twisted at the thought of what she had planned for tomorrow. Almondstar smiled at him, and if it weren't for everything she was, Brinepaw could've believed there was kindness in that smile.

She turned away abruptly and called to her warriors. Sunclaw and the others flocked to her, ready to depart.

The big-bodied apprentice watched as they left the beach and plodded up the grassy hill that would lead them to the camp. A breeze passed over the coast, but Brinepaw's fur was too damp and matted with salt to stir in the brisk wind. He sat motionlessly along the water, unsure of where to go next.

He didn't want to follow them back to camp, but he *really* didn't want to stay where he was.

Just as he was getting up, a rusty-colored figure appeared over the hill. The figure had darker red markings and creamy white chest fur.

"Burnetpaw!" Brinepaw exclaimed as he ran to meet the tom, "What are you doing here?"

"I saw Almondstar and the others returning to camp, so I assumed you must be finished for the day."

Brinepaw sighed, "Finally."

Burnetpaw looked sad for a moment, but then he perked up. "Hey,

do you wanna go hunting? We don't have to if you're too tired, but maybe just a stroll through the forest?"

Truthfully, Brinepaw *was* exhausted, but for all the wrong reasons. He decided he'd rather be exhausted from tramping around the woods with his best friend than from Almondstar's countless training sessions. So he nodded enthusiastically in response, "Sure. That sounds great."

"Okay!" Burnetpaw was so happy he leapt for joy, "Let's get going then."

Together, they set out over the rise and headed for the distant trees. The verdant forest leaves looked golden under the bright sunlight. It was hot, but not too hot. Brinepaw felt rather comfortable. His coat was still frosted by little droplets of saltwater, so the slight breeze cooled him as he walked. And except for the waves crashing behind them, it was peaceful and quiet. A few seagulls hopped around in the grass, but they made no noise. There was a fat, green caterpillar on a strand of grass up ahead and butterflies flapping lazily through the air.

About halfway to the forest, Burnetpaw jumped in surprise as a brown snake slithered through the long grass and down a small tunnel.

"It's just a snake, mouse-brain," Brinepaw laughed, bumping his friend's shoulder lightly.

"I know," Burnetpaw retorted, "I wasn't scared."

"Sure you weren't."

"Hey! Shut up!" Burnetpaw demanded. He still sounded a little shaken.

Brinepaw hared away from him, guffawing with laughter. Burnetpaw chased him, his tiny feet pounding the field as he ran.

They raced around the open meadow, passing bunches of colorful flowers and bouncing over fallen logs. Brinepaw felt a lightness in his step that he hadn't experienced in quite some time. His heart felt

warm and fuzzy.

"Get back here!" Burnetpaw panted, beginning to slow down.

Brinepaw turned around. "What's the matter?" he teased, "Out of shape?"

"Absolutely not," Burnetpaw argued, but he was breathing so hard he was barely able to get the words out. "Honestly, Brinepaw, you used to be the slowest apprentice in the den. But now suddenly you're not only the fastest, but the most capable."

"You're wrong," Brinepaw said, "Milkpaw is still *way* faster than me. Bluepaw, too."

"Maybe," admitted Burnetpaw, "But even so, you've really come a long way."

They resumed walking. Brinepaw shrugged, "I guess. I mean, Almondstar's been working me really hard."

Burnetpaw opened his hazel eyes wide, "I know! It's crazy! It's like you never have any time to enjoy yourself anymore."

Brinepaw wasn't sure how much he'd enjoyed himself even *before* all the training. He was always worrying. He was always upset. At least now there was something to distract him from everything he was feeling. He wanted to tell Burnetpaw this, but he couldn't figure out a way to say it without sounding like he needed help. *Every* cat had problems. He was just too stupid to sort out *his* problems on his own. But he would keep trying. He didn't want to disturb anyone.

After all, that was just life, right? Life was tough and demanding and sad sometimes.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah," Brinepaw answered glumly.

His friend sighed, "Sorry, Brinepaw. I didn't mean to bum you out. Let's just focus on having a good time, okay? This is the first you've been free in *days*. We can finally hang out again."

"You're right," agreed Brinepaw. He tried to push his intruding thoughts away. Burnetpaw still looked concerned, so he attempted to lighten the mood. He offered a weak smile, "Seriously though, why did you get so startled by that snake? That was just ridiculous."

Burnetpaw's whiskers twitched with amusement, "You don't have to be so rude about it," he meowed, "I just wasn't expecting it, that's all."

"Why not?" Brinepaw pressed, "These fields are packed with snakes."

"Okay, okay, I get it. Do you *really* want to know why?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Well, this is pretty embarrassing, but I guess I was just caught off guard because I was so lost in thought."

Now Brinepaw was interested. "What were you thinking about?"

Burnetpaw bowed his head shyly as he padded along. They were nearing the woods now. "I was thinking about how this is so wonderful," murmured Burnetpaw, his heather-hued eyes soft with genuine happiness.

"What do you mean?" asked Brinepaw.

"All of this. The light, the air, the feeling of freedom. The birds above our heads and the beetles beneath our toes. It's all just amazing. *Life* is amazing."

Brinepaw wished he could share in his friend's delight, but he just looked at Burnetpaw with a perplexed expression.

They entered the shade of the trees and Burnetpaw breathed in deeply. "And this," he said, "Now there is moss and shadows and chirping crickets."

Brinepaw gazed around at the greenery and the plants. It *was* beautiful. The frequent newleaf storms had ushered in a bounty of flourishing undergrowth. Everything was healthy and well-watered.

The flowers were entering full bloom as greenleaf made its rapid approach. The floor was thick with lichen and pine needles.

For once, Brinepaw thought he understood what Burnetpaw meant. He could see the beauty. There was no denying it. It was right there before him.

"What a wonderful world," Brinepaw ventured, but the sentence felt wrong even as he spoke it.

Burnetpaw blinked at him fondly, "What a wonderful world indeed!"

He was so very happy all the time, Brinepaw wondered how he did it. Where had he acquired such an incredible zest for life? How did he manage to forgive the world for all of the evil that existed within it? How could he possibly love so deeply in spite of how wretched everyone was? Burnetpaw was truly unlike any other cat in the clan. He had a pure soul.

All he wanted was to go on living. Each new day brought him such excitement and such pleasure that he couldn't imagine anything better.

In contrast, all Brinepaw wanted was to *stop* living. He'd given up a long time ago, but it seemed that no matter how hard he tried, it was impossible to stop existing completely.

Brinepaw was more confused now than ever before. At the gathering, his life had changed forever. And the recurring visions of smoke and fire disturbed and frightened him. He'd tried to kill himself, but Ghost had miraculously healed him. And who *was* Ghost? Why was he so involved? And then there was the question of his powers. Where had they come from, and what were they for? None of it was logical. None of it was realistic. And yet it was so real.

He listened to his paws shuffle against the tender grass and allowed the sound to fill his mind and block out the unpleasant thoughts. Burnetpaw was ahead of him now, his fluffy tail raised gleefully in the air. His tabby stripes blended in well with the woodland setting.

He stopped and rotated his dark ears, his tail dropping and falling still.

Brinepaw observed curiously as Burnetpaw shifted his body to face a young maple tree. Then he noticed the plump squirrel sitting in the crook of two of its tree limbs. The bushy-tailed animal was completely unaware of the presence of danger. It remained in place, cleaning its paws and blinking its huge, shining black eyes. Burnetpaw crouched and waggled his haunches.

It was strange watching his clanmate hunt. Brinepaw had grown so used to his method of hunting that he couldn't imagine ever doing it the regular way again. Before the gathering, the majority of Brinepaw's attempts at catching prey were wildly unsuccessful. He'd embarrassed himself plenty of times and gone to bed hungry even more, too ashamed of his incompetence to take something from the pile. Covestorm had always assured him that it was fine to eat, even when he'd failed to catch anything, but Brinepaw couldn't see how that could possibly be true. It was a warrior's responsibility to provide for his or her clan. At least now, thanks to his odd gift, he could go home with something to show for himself.

Burnetpaw bolted across the ground and sprung into the tree, pinning the squirrel against the wood with one paw. Swiftly, while clutching the bark with his claws, he leaned down and nipped the squirrel's neck.

It was a clean kill. Burnetpaw landed back on the ground with the prey dangling from his jaws. He grinned proudly.

"Well done," mewed Brinepaw.

"Thanks!" Burnetpaw said, dropping his prey, "Now it's your turn."

Brinepaw looked at him hesitantly, "There's no water here..."

"I know there's no water here, silly," Burnetpaw chuckled, "You have to hunt normally!"

Brinepaw shook his head. Not only did he despise being called 'silly', but he also refused to do any conventional hunting. He wasn't

any good at it before, and surely nothing had changed since then.

"Come on, Brinepaw!" Burnetpaw begged, "Just try it."

"I'm horrible at hunting," protested Brinepaw, "You know that."

Before Burnetpaw could reply, there was a scuttling in the branches. Brinepaw glanced upwards to see a cute robin popping around in the light green canopy of a birch tree. He looked back at his friend, who was waiting expectantly.

"Fine," Brinepaw groaned, waltzing over to the base of the slender tree.

He climbed the trunk as quietly as he could manage, but the bark was papery and he kept sliding back down. The slippery white rind peeled away under his claws as he ascended towards the scarlet-chested bird. Finally, he lay on top of a skinny branch that sat directly over where the robin was settled. Brinepaw was surprised he'd come this far without scaring the bird away, but he was thankful for this apparent stroke of luck.

The robin cocked its head from side to side and thrust its yellow beak back and forth. Brinepaw let out a slow breath as he prepared to pounce.

He could see Burnetpaw through the branches, watching hopefully from the ground. Brinepaw couldn't disappoint him now.

He dropped from his perch and crushed the robin easily. But with the weight of his fall, he also took down the branch the robin had been roosting on. Brinepaw yelped as he landed in the dirt with a *whump*. Burnetpaw made no effort to stifle his laughter, flopping over on his back in absolute gaiety.

Brinepaw winced as he pushed himself back up. The robin lay smooshed in the soil, blood and guts spilling out from its body. Brinepaw couldn't believe what a sloppy kill it was.

He looked back and forth between the messy robin and his cackling friend. Suddenly it was very funny to him as well. He broke into a fit of giggles, collapsing on the earth next to Burnetpaw and rolling

back and forth with his paws sprawled up towards the sky.

It took them a long time to calm down. When at last the laughter had ceased to a point where Brinepaw could hear the bugs again, he realized that his stomach ached with all of the laughs. He beamed up at the spread of rippling peridot leaves. He understood why Burnetpaw was so happy all the time. It must be because no matter where he was, he was always with himself. Brinepaw thought maybe if *he* were with Burnetpaw all the time, he'd feel the same way.

How lucky he is to be someone likable. If I liked myself, being alone wouldn't be so bad.

But in this moment he wasn't alone. He turned his head until his cheek was mashed against the stinky dirt. Burnetpaw was staring up at the trees. At least, that's what it looked like. But upon closer inspection, Brinepaw saw that he was actually staring *past* the trees, to the blue newleaf sky.

Brinepaw felt somewhat delirious as a rare state of ecstasy took over his conscious. It was a little uncomfortable. This happiness wasn't natural or sustainable. But it was the only form of feeling okay that Brinepaw knew, so he took what he could get.

eleven

Brinepaw rolled onto his back, his legs bent in the air and his big, fluffy forepaws flopped over his chest. He was sleeping soundly. His bed was so soft, supple green moss embroidered with white feathers. The air was crisp as it flowed into the apprentices' den, but Brinepaw was snuggled so far into his bedding that he remained warm. The breeze played with his fur as it passed through the space, then drifted out again and into the open sky.

He purred as he coiled his body to one side, still lying on his back. He straightened his legs and stretched, toes spread out wide. He was dreaming peacefully. The world seemed full and dark and fuzzy.

There was a stomping sound as somebody entered the den and noisy mewing turned to panicked shouts.

Brinepaw came out of his deep sleep, roused by all the commotion. His eyes opened and slowly adjusted to the gentle morning light. It was mostly blocked out by the walls of the den, but even the muted brown light that filtered through the entrance was too harsh for Brinepaw's sleepy vision. The snoozing bodies of the other apprentices were now beginning to stir, some of them jumping up completely. Brinepaw lifted his chin to see an unfamiliar she-cat moving swiftly through the den, hostility concentrated in her sharp blue eyes.

Bluepaw popped up from where he'd been sleeping, fur standing on all ends. He squeaked in surprise as the situation registered, "Attack! We're under attack!"

Finally, Brinepaw was awake enough to comprehend what he was seeing. He lurched to his feet as the she-cat approached. Behind her was white and beige tom with gray-blue eyes. Brinepaw recognized him as Coralstep, a well-respected WaveClan warrior.

The enemy cats continued towards him in what seemed like slow-

motion, their muscular frames rippling with every step. Brinepaw gawked as Burnetpaw rose up from behind them and prepared to strike.

"Whitefin, behind you!" warned Coralstep, and the she-cat whipped around to clobber Burnetpaw with a large, snowy paw.

"No!" Brinepaw yelped, bounding forward to help his friend.

But Whitefin turned to block his path. She wore a malicious grin.

Nearby, Bunnypaw unsheathed her claws and prepared to fight. She glanced over at Brinepaw, "Brinepaw! You need to get out of here! Don't worry, we'll handle them."

Just as Brinepaw was about to reply, Coralstep tackled Bunnypaw to the ground. Milkpaw scrambled out of her nest, hissing. She pounced onto Coralstep's back and grabbed his shoulder with her teeth. The WaveClan tom cried out in pain.

Brinepaw pushed past Whitefin and attempted to escape, but two more warriors had barged into the den. Bluepaw threw himself into battle, knocking an amber-furred tom into the rock. Meanwhile, Burnetpaw took the other cat, a brown tabby tom with inky brown eyes.

"Go!" Burnetpaw urged, huffing as he kicked his opponent with his back leg.

Brinepaw froze with his legs splayed apart. In his moment of hesitation, Whitefin managed to catch up with him and throw a claw-laced blow across his rear paws. Brinepaw crumbled against the floor of the den and felt hot blood run into the creases between his toes. He flipped himself onto his back, only to see Whitefin looming ominously above.

She bent down, jaws gaping and then closing painfully around his neck. Brinepaw felt her teeth press against his jugular. She punctured his skin, and the blood began to spill.

He knew it was over if he didn't act fast. There was no water in sight, but he could feel it floating in the air. It was thin, invisible

moisture, smooth to the touch.

Now, if he could only *harvest* it.

Brinepaw closed his eyes. The sharpness of Whitefin's bite was so agonizing it sent red flashes across his darkened vision. He tried to focus on the vapor that was swirling all around him. Wispy tendrils of condensation, just waiting to be pulled into water.

He brought the thin blanket of moisture together into one lump of wetness. It thickened and thickened until he could hear it splashing above his head. His eyes opened, but he was blinded by pain. Everything looked shadowy and unreal. Whitefin's face was a vague shape pressed to his, her mouth still closed around his neck. The mass of water he'd created was certainly there, but in his weakened state it appeared like a gray ball of darkness.

Whitefin's grasp on him loosened briefly as she glanced upwards at the foaming, rushing water. Brinepaw could see clearer now. The she-cat's white expression was incredulous.

He took the opportunity to shoot the water at her face. She let out a scream as the rapidly moving liquid sliced across her eyes. Blood splattered onto Brinepaw's face. He squealed in shock and disgust as he writhed away from the WaveClan warrior's reach. Whitefin floundered towards him as the pungent smell of blood clogged the air.

"You fox-hearted apprentice!" Whitefin roared, "You've blinded me!"

Brinepaw opened his mouth slightly, aghast. Where Whitefin's eyes had been, there were now two black hollows that spurted with blood. The blood dripped down Whitefin's cheeks and off her chin. Saliva dribbled from her drawn back lips. Her beautiful, white mottled fur was stained a mixture of crimson and coal black. The hollows of her eyes were empty and awful. They bore into Brinepaw as if her eyes were still there, but this time they were nothing but a soulless void.

Brinepaw retched up a chunky stream of vomit. He recovered and heaved again, but this time nothing came out.

Whitefin staggered towards him, moaning in pain. Around them the fighting continued. Brinepaw ducked as Whitefin threw a badly aimed blow at his head. He felt her paw whoosh between his ears, and she grunted in frustration. Brinepaw straightened back up, pulling more water from the air as she recovered and attacked again. She snapped at him and threw another blow with one huge paw. Brinepaw backed into the wall of the den and allowed the water to swallow his feet. Taking a deep breath, he lunged for his blind opponent and struck her in the belly, then brought the water upwards to slash her neck.

But before he delivered the killing blow, he paused to see Whitefin shaking with fear. The blood still squirted from where her eyes had been, and her features were contorted and gruesome. Brinepaw sighed, letting the water fall away from her neck. He couldn't kill her. If he did, he would never forgive himself.

The rage on her face had disappeared. Whitefin sat back, slumped over her paws like a dead fish. Misery radiated off her pelt. For a long moment she was quiet. Then she began to make soft, muffled noises. At first, Brinepaw thought she might be laughing. But then he saw the mucous slopping out of her nostrils and the understated shudders of her body. She was crying.

"My eyes!" she sobbed, bending her head into the leaf-littered floor. Blood oozed from her wounds and soaked the ground. "My poor eyes! I'm never... I'm... I can't see..."

Pity struck Brinepaw like a bolt of lightning. He crept forward. Had he done the right thing? Surely she would have killed him otherwise. But seeing her suffering now, Brinepaw wondered if that would have been for the best.

"I'm sorry," Brinepaw whispered, but Whitefin gave no acknowledgment that she had heard him. Instead, she sunk entirely into the soil and became very still. Her whimpers faded. She was still breathing, but an eerie calm seemed to have taken hold of her body.

Brinepaw could hear a battle raging outside the den. *WaveClan must have brought nearly their entire clan,* he thought

grimly. His attention snapped back to the area around him. The other apprentices were still in the midst of battle. They bore some scrapes and scratches, but for the most part, they appeared to be winning.

Good. Maybe that means I can get out of here.

An unusual instinct for self-preservation had sparked within him. Brinepaw took one last look at the violent scene before he whirled around and exited the den.

His eyes burned as he was momentarily blinded by the sunlight. Then, slowly, the harshness of the light dissipated and the image before him came into view. There were cats of both clans scattered everywhere. The entire camp stank of blood. Chilling shrieks filled the air. Brinepaw searched desperately for Covestorm. He needed to know that his mentor was safe.

When he couldn't find him, panic set in. He raced right into the middle of the chaos, glancing about frantically. He saw Sagecloud and Baycrash fighting side by side as three WaveClan warriors challenged them. Further away, Skymask wrestled with an apprentice. Brinepaw peered closer and recognized Plumpaw. The light gray tom's feathery fur was torn away in patches. Brinepaw felt a cold sorrow wash done his spine. Had it really come to this?

They were here for him. They'd gone for the apprentices' den first, and now they were determined to keep all of the warriors out of the way. Brinepaw could tell in the way they moved that everything was very calculated. Everything had been planned. This was not a spur of the moment decision.

Adderstar wanted him dead.

The thought scared him. *But why?* he wondered, *Why should I be so worried about death when death is what I wanted in the first place?*

He wasn't sure, but now wasn't the time to think about it. Brinepaw resumed scanning the camp and eventually located

Heronstrike along the perimeter. He was grappling with Tigershade, a WaveClan warrior highly esteemed for her fighting skill. Brinepaw bounded over, muscles tensing as he prepared to go into battle.

Tigershade had Heronstrike pinned to the ground. He wriggled around underneath her grip, but to no avail. Squeezing his eyes shut, Brinepaw rammed his head into the she-cat's side. She choked in surprise and tumbled over. Heronstrike jumped up. "Thanks," he mewed when he saw Brinepaw. He was panting and appeared somewhat flustered.

Tigershade popped up. Her fur was dusty and her yellow eyes were wide. "You!" she snarled, raising a black forepaw, "You're Brinepaw!"

Brinepaw narrowed his eyes until they were sharp bronze slices. "That's right," he confirmed, spreading his stance and lashing his tail.

Tigershade pounced at him, reaching out with her paw and attempting to grab hold of his leg. Fortunately, Heronstrike read her movement perfectly and managed to block the effort with his body. Brinepaw pulled the moisture from the air into a tangible stream of water. Heronstrike stepped aside, allowing Brinepaw to pummel Tigershade's front. The she-cat yipped as she was shoved backwards.

Heronstrike resumed his position in the fight and prepared to take her on again. He waved Brinepaw away with his tail. "Leave," he ordered the apprentice, "It's not safe for you here."

"Where's Covestorm?"

"Last I saw, he was fighting Adderstar by the Red Cliff," Heronstrike glanced back for a quick second, a glint of wisdom in his eye, "Go to him if you must. But after that, go far away. As long as you are here, this conflict will see no end."

Brinepaw nodded. Tigershade let out a low growl as she recovered her full strength and sped towards him. Heronstrike unsheathed his claws and stood in her way.

Scampering away, Brinepaw felt his heart almost leap out of his chest. He headed for the Red Cliff and prepared for the worst.

He passed dozens of tussling bodies as he went. Tufts of fur flew through the air. Mewls of fright and confusion echoed from the nursery as he hurried by. There was an uncomfortable knot wedged in the middle of Brinepaw's gut. Would he be too late?

Finally, he could see through the mess of fighting to the Red Cliff. Sure enough, he could make out Covestorm's smoke tabby figure on top, pressed against the rock by a leaner tom. Brinepaw quickened his pace and sprinted for the sharp, jutting boulder. He reached the bottom and glanced around for an easy way up. There was none, so he sprung onto the side and latched on. Smaller pebbles clacked as they fell down the face of the cliff. Brinepaw pushed with his hind legs and scrabbled up a few tail-lengths, stopping to rest for a moment on a flatter slope. Then he started to climb again, letting out a breath of relief when at last his front paw swung over the top of the rock.

Brinepaw pulled himself to the top, whisking his tail to summon a stream of water. Without hesitation, he sent the stream forward to pierce Adderstar's back. The leader howled in pain and Covestorm struggled out from under him. His deep orange eyes lit up at the sight of Brinepaw.

But Covestorm's joy swiftly turned to concern. "What are you doing here?" he asked, but his question was cut short when Adderstar rolled back to his feet and let out a menacing hiss.

"So," the WaveClan leader purred, "It's the apprentice I've heard so much about."

Covestorm tensed, "Don't lay a paw on him," he cautioned darkly, "Brinepaw's done nothing wrong."

"He nearly killed a WaveClan apprentice!" Adderstar shouted, flexing his claws, "As long as he lives, my clan will be unsafe."

"That's not true," said Covestorm, "He's not dangerous. *Your* cats made the choice to trespass. He was only defending our

territory."

Adderstar's amber eyes flashed with anger, "You're wrong, Covestorm. He *is* dangerous. He's proven that already. I will not allow TideClan to rule by fear any longer. WaveClan has a right to these waters too."

"I'm not disputing that," Covestorm replied calmly.

"Then surely you must understand my dilemma, Covestorm," Adderstar's voice was trembling now. He watched Brinepaw through wide, honey-colored eyes, "This apprentice threatens the very balance of our lives. He has powers unlike anything we've seen before. It's unnatural for a single cat to command the entire ocean."

Brinepaw looked on anxiously as Covestorm took a daring step towards the enemy leader.

"And yet it's happened," said Covestorm, "There must be a reason. Perhaps his powers were sent by StarClan themselves. Did you ever consider that? You could be attempting to kill a cat chosen by StarClan."

"Has Sandfire mentioned anything? Has there been a prophecy?"

Covestorm gazed indignantly into Adderstar's eyes. He said nothing.

"That's what I thought."

The two toms faced off for a long time. The wails of battle rose up from beneath them. Brinepaw saw that Adderstar's reddish brown fur was still bristling, but he'd sheathed his claws. Covestorm stood with his legs wide apart, prepped for the first sign of an attack.

Brinepaw took a pace forward. He stood alongside his mentor. "I'm sorry for what happened to Nightpaw," he meowed, "I never meant to hurt him. And I don't intend to hurt anybody now. Please, you have to believe me."

His bronze eyes were shining.

Adderstar frowned. He seemed to be deep in thought. But then he spoke with decisive anger, "You are a curse to this world, Brinepaw. Look around you." Brinepaw peeked over the edge of the cliff at the puddles of blood and the shrieking cats. A lump caught in his throat. "This is all because of you," Adderstar continued, "If only you were normal, none of this would have ever happened."

"That's enough," growled Covestorm, dropping into a crouch, "Get out."

Adderstar looked smug. He turned to the crowd of cats beneath them and raised his tail, "WaveClan! Come now! We return to camp!"

The fighting began to break up as WaveClan departed. The TideClan warriors shouted victoriously as they watched them leave. Brinepaw could see the apprentices just outside of the mouth of the den. They looked confident and proud as they chased away the last of the WaveClan cats. Whitefin followed behind her clanmates, guided by Coralstep.

Adderstar skidded down the rock face and landed neatly on the sand. He turned to look up at Brinepaw and Covestorm one last time. Although he said nothing, his amber irises twinkled sinisterly. This wasn't the end. They would be back.

At last, the leader went to join his clan. His russet figure disappeared into the distance.

Brinepaw realized he'd been holding his breath. He let out an exasperated sigh.

Covestorm breathed out as well and his fur began to flatten. "It's okay," he murmured, facing his apprentice, "They're gone now."

"I'm sorry!" Brinepaw burst out, eyes full of fear, "I didn't mean for this to happen!"

Covestorm looked shocked, "Of course you didn't," he replied softly, "This wasn't your fault. Adderstar is overreacting. It's just as

Almondstar said. He feels threatened."

"Exactly!" cried Brinepaw, "He feels threatened because of *me!"*

"Perhaps," Covestorm admitted. He nudged Brinepaw's chin, "But you can't blame yourself. Right now, all I want you to focus on is figuring out why you were granted these abilities. Nothing else matters. Let me handle WaveClan, okay? Just figure out what this all means. Can you do that for me?"

Brinepaw shivered. He wasn't sure he could.

But Covestorm was waiting. His orange gaze was intense.

Finally, Brinepaw nodded.

"Good."

They sat on the edge of the Red Cliff. Cats were beginning to emerge from their dens and join in the center of camp. Sandfire and Fawnpaw travelled around checking wounds, bunches of strongly-scented herbs hanging in their jaws. Little kits bumbled excitedly out of the nursery, followed by Dawnwind and Fogspirit. The queens looked distraught by the state of the camp.

Everything was messy. Red rivers of blood meandered through the cracks in the rocks. Some cats were barely moving. The warriors looked traumatized as they got steadily to their feet. Brinepaw noticed a gray body deposited sloppily against the side of the warriors' den.

Dread hung over him like a raincloud. He skidded down the rock and landed on the camp floor. Covestorm followed.

Together, they watched as Fawnpaw hared past them and over to the body. Her expression turned from hopeful to solemn as she inspected the fallen warrior. Blinking sorrowfully, she raised her head and let out a wail, "Rainflight is dead!"

A thick layer of clouds had covered the sky. The colors of the sunset were drowned out by a depressing blanket of gray. Over the ocean, the moon rose, but it was hidden. Brinepaw felt nighttime creeping in as he sat by the apprentices' den. He lifted his chin to the chilling breeze. There was a circle of cats gathered at the center of camp. Between them was Rainflight's lifeless body.

Brinepaw had tried to face him. He'd tried to pay his respects. But the deputy's eyes were blank and frightening. All he could do was sit and observe as those that were closest to him said goodbye.

He could see Bluepaw at the center of the circle. He was dipping his muzzle to touch his mentor's face. The apprentice's green eyes were vacant.

The uncanny silence was broken as pawsteps filled the air. Brinepaw stood up as Almondstar made her way to the foot of the Red Cliff. She mounted the boulder in a few efficient leaps and appeared at the top.

"Cats of TideClan."

Brinepaw went to gather with his clan. Cats poked their heads out of their dens and moved carefully into the center of camp. Those around Rainflight's body turned to listen.

Almondstar spoke very slowly, choosing her words carefully, "A terrible tragedy took place today," she said, "And we will sit vigil for Rainflight tonight. But first, as required by the warrior code, I must appoint a new deputy."

Brinepaw couldn't help but glance over at Covestorm, who was seated by Rainflight's lifeless figure. The great tabby looked surprisingly disinterested.

Almondstar's voice cracked as she proceeded with the ceremony, "I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of TideClan is Heronstrike."

Quiet mews rippled over the crowd as Heronstrike stepped forth. His flank was ripped and matted with dried blood. He bowed his head to his leader, "Thank you, Almondstar. I am honored to be chosen to serve at your side."

Brinepaw looked at Covestorm again, but his face was difficult to read.

The meeting came to a close. Cats wandered over to Heronstrike and congratulated him. The large warrior smiled gratefully.

Brinepaw felt like he was in the middle of a misty, flowing dream. He stood still as cats bumped him and pushed him aside. Nobody seemed to know where to go. There was a subdued hysteria floating around the clearing. Everything was dim and faint and blurry. The world had entered a state of sleep.

Brinepaw shouldered his way back to his den. He went inside.

The moon stayed behind the clouds all night.

twelve

Brinepaw opened his eyes. They were sore. He tried to get up, but every muscle in his body ached. He sank back into his bed slowly.

He was still groggy from his sleep, but he could see that Bunnypaw was hunched over in the corner of the den. She was licking her wounds, sending crusts of dry blood flying into the cracks in the floor. Milkpaw was at her side, murmuring in a quiet voice, but Bunnypaw didn't appear to be listening.

"You shouldn't do that, you know," Brinepaw grunted through the moss in his nest.

Bunnypaw ignored him.

"You'll make it raw," Brinepaw warned.

Again, Bunnypaw ignored him. The uncanny sound of her lapping tongue filled the silence of the den.

"Fine," muttered Brinepaw. He sat up, wincing as he felt a twinge in his shoulder. Flashing images of battle raced through his head. The pungent smell of blood wriggled up his nose and settled in his mouth. He stumbled slightly as he left the den.

The clouds from the previous night had cleared and the sun was shining brightly again. Even so, the camp felt somewhat dreary. As soon as he set a paw onto the sand, Brinepaw felt his stomach twist and his gut tighten. Tension suffocated his lungs. Darkness swallowed everything. There were a few warriors scattered about, but none of them looked particularly happy. As Brinepaw padded out into the heat, he could hear soft mews coming from inside the medicine cat's den. His ears pricked at the sound of his sister's voice.

Though he'd originally planned on grabbing something to

eat, Brinepaw decided to take a quick detour. He turned and headed into the medicine cat's den. The air was bitter and everything was shady and cool. The front of the den was empty. "Fawnpaw?" Brinepaw called. His voice echoed off the walls and faded into the depths of the chasm.

He peered tentatively around the bend in the cave. He spotted Fawnpaw's doe-colored frame against the back wall. She was turned away, mumbling to herself. Brinepaw approached cautiously.

At last Fawnpaw seemed to sense his presence. She spun around, her green eyes bright with surprise. "Brinepaw! I didn't hear you come in."

"What are you doing?" he asked, noticing a pile of herbs at her paws.

"Oh," Fawnpaw glanced down at the pile. She looked frustrated. "I'm sorting these herbs. Sandfire went out to collect more, so I'm supposed to stay here in case any cat needs help."

Brinepaw nodded. He watched Fawnpaw closely for a moment. She seemed uneasy. Her eyes were still wide and her white-dappled fur stood on end. "Are you okay?" he questioned.

Fawnpaw's ears flattened against her head and she gave a sad smile, "Of course I am," she assured him, "I'm just exhausted. Cats have been in and out all night."

"Are there any serious injuries?"

"Yes," replied Fawnpaw, "But we won't lose anyone else."

"That's good," Brinepaw said, thinking of Rainflight's shredded body. By the look on Fawnpaw's face, he could tell she was thinking of the fallen deputy, too. They shared a moment of mournful silence.

Rainflight had been a good cat. He hadn't liked Brinepaw very much, but he'd been a good cat nonetheless. As Fleetwater's brother, Brinepaw had always been skeptical of him. But Brinepaw

had seen how different Rainflight was from Fleetwater. Fleetwater was a bad cat. He lived with a monster inside of him. He walked a path of evil. But Rainflight... Rainflight had no monster. Sure, he was stubborn and willful and serious, but he wasn't ever violent or aggressive. Brinepaw wondered how two siblings could possibly turn out so differently.

Then he considered himself and Fawnpaw. Fawnpaw was smart and motivated. And she was such a talented medicine cat. Every cat in the clan knew it, too; they talked about it all the time. And Brinepaw had seen the way Sandfire loved and encouraged her. She was a true prodigy.

But he, Brinepaw, wasn't smart or motivated. Before obtaining his powers, he had barely made it to a single training session. Covestorm had tried to inspire him, but Brinepaw wasn't capable of being inspired. It felt as though he'd been living his entire life wrong, but he wasn't sure how to stop it. Maybe this was just how things were meant to be. Maybe some cats were born with enthusiasm, and some cats weren't.

"Brinepaw?"

Brinepaw realized he'd been lost in thought. He blinked and cleared his mind. "What?"

"I just asked if you needed anything."

Fawnpaw was looking at him with genuine concern. He could see the tiredness behind her eyes, and yet she still had the energy and the empathy to worry about him. He sighed, "No, I just wanted to see how you were."

His sister bounced on her toes a little, "Oh," she said, "Well, I'm fine, as you can see."

"Good," purred Brinepaw. He felt a sudden wave of affection and he leaned in to nudge her chin. Fawnpaw nuzzled him back and they shared a quiet moment. The den felt isolated and secure. There was nobody else. He was reminded of when they were just tiny kits, mewling and shifting under the weight of their mother's fur.

But as they pulled away, the dreariness began to settle in again. Fawnpaw's eyes faded to a lightless opal. Her gaze seemed to pierce right through him. Brinepaw couldn't think of anything else to say, so he turned away silently and slunk out of the den. He felt as though he'd left something unfinished, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Fawnpaw would be okay. She was strong and resilient, and her heart was always in the right place. Surely her future was clear. Surely she walked a starlit path.

Brinepaw squinted as the sun scorched his eyes. He skulked miserably to the fresh-kill pile and picked out a meaty fish. Finding some shade, he laid down and pulled the flesh from its bones, chewing thoughtfully. The flavor was full and delicious.

As usual, his mind began to wander. He thought about Fawnpaw sitting alone in the dark, mumbling over her herbs. He thought about Bunnypaw slumped against the wall of the apprentices' den with her tongue pressed into her dried blood. He thought about war and the probability that there would be more deaths to come.

It depressed him, but that was nothing new. Brinepaw was used to the feeling of depression. So he sunk into it and fell deeper into the hole. Soon his awareness of the camp around him disappeared completely, and he felt he was lying in a pool of cold black water. His heart pumped loudly in his ears as he remembered back to his visions, to the storm, to the strange, translucent image of Ghost. *It must all be connected*, he thought in the midst of the cool black water, *There must be a reason I'm like this.*

And then suddenly the black water thickened and became a freezing, vile sludge. Brinepaw flopped around as it covered his ears, then his face, then poured into his mouth and stopped his breathing.

He reappeared in camp. He looked down and saw that his fish was gone. The sharp bones of its skeleton lay at his paws. Brinepaw picked them up in his teeth and tossed them to the side. He was feeling a little sick. He hadn't meant to fall so far into his thoughts, but sometimes it couldn't be helped.

He shook out his long coat. A few fox-lengths away, Brinepaw noticed Almondstar discussing something rather secretly with Heronstrike. He strained his ears and listened in, but he could only pick up a few words of their conversation. They seemed to be speaking about WaveClan. Brinepaw figured that Almondstar wanted to attack their camp. It wasn't like her to wait around.

He tried to strut by casually, but he caught the critical yellow gaze of Heronstrike and felt his heart leap. The conversation died and Almondstar turned her head. Brinepaw scuttled away nervously. When he was at last a good distance away, the conference resumed.

Brinepaw sighed at the edge of camp. What was he doing? He didn't care about politics. Well, at least, he hadn't *used* to. Now it seemed like he had to care. It seemed like everything in the world involved him in one way or another. It wasn't so bad, to feel important. But at least when he'd felt unimportant he hadn't had to answer to anyone. There was some freedom in that. It was a miserable sort of freedom, sure, but freedom nonetheless.

At last he decided it was time to go. The morning was too bleak here. Maybe he could find some trace of happiness in the forest.

So he set out. It was unusual for him to choose the forest over the beach, but it seemed the right thing to do. After all, he hadn't had much luck with the beach lately. There were too many distressing visions associated with the shoreline. But the forest seemed harmless enough.

He ran the entire way. It was nice to run again. More specifically, it was nice to run and also know that he wasn't running for any particular reason. There was no enemy warrior behind him and there was no cliff ahead of him; it was a relief just to run for the sake of it.

And it was a great temperature. Far enough from the ocean that the wind wasn't too cold, but close enough to the ocean that he could still enjoy the crispness of the breeze. The sun was warm overhead, but just pleasantly so that the grass felt comfortable and

cozy on his pads. And when he got to the forest, the light filtered through the canopy of leaves just as it should. The floor was dappled and spotted and tawny with sunlight. The pine needles that blanketed the dirt were a soothing, evening orange. The bracken sprung joyfully from the undergrowth, humming in the breeze as it reached for the sky. Brinepaw could feel the life of the forest come up through his paws and spread through his body, and he welcomed it.

He explored contentedly, with a soft smile on his face. There was the clearing where he had fought Bluepaw and there was the birch tree he'd loved to climb as a young apprentice and oh!—there was the pile of rocks where he'd caught his first mouse.

What a lovely place it was. As Brinepaw made his way through the trees, he promised himself that he'd come here more often.

He bent down to drink from a pool of clear water. It went smoothly down his throat.

Then he went on. Slowly, now. He focused on the sensation of the moss between his toes. He focused on the sound of the branches bending and creaking above him. It was, in a word, *perfection*. The first moment of utter perfection he'd experienced in quite some time.

He went on like that, for a while. Soon he was very far from camp. And maybe if he'd been more alert, he would have known that he was being followed.

Yes, Brinepaw was being followed. And not by just one cat, but by two. But he was too happy to realize. The forest had reinstated his faith in the world.

But, as he should have known, life tends to be more awful than good.

He took a break by a fallen maple. He sat on its trunk.

It was such a wonderful spot. There were chipmunks

squeaking overhead, and the air smelled like ferns.

Brinepaw decided he would take a nap. He found a comfortable position on the bark of the maple tree and shut his eyes.

It was at this time that the first cat appeared. Brinepaw didn't know he was there until he spoke.

"Brinepaw, wake up."

Brinepaw had nearly been asleep already. He was so tired. He allowed his eyelids to flutter open calmly. The shape of a cat stood beneath him. As his senses returned to him, Brinepaw recognized the raven-colored figure. He stood up abruptly, wobbling a bit on the trunk.

"Fleetwater!" he gasped.

Fleetwater had an unsettling air about him, more so than usual. His amber eyes looked wide and crazed. His movements were rather twitchy. "Brinepaw, I finally found you," he said.

Brinepaw was already feeling around the area, trying to distinguish how much vapor there was in the air. It was rather dry, but he knew he could pull out at least *some* water, if he really needed to. Knowing this, he felt a little more assured that he would be okay. He narrowed his eyes at his father and demanded, "What do you want?"

The tom chuckled madly, "I want you, Brinepaw. My son. You are my son."

Brinepaw shook his head. "I'm not your son. You said it yourself, Fleetwater. You're not proud of me. You never have been."

Fleetwater's face contorted angrily. "Liar!" he shouted, "You *are* my son! I know you are! Don't lie to me, kit!"

Brinepaw had seen this before. Sometimes, Fleetwater wasn't right in the head. Actually, he was *never* right in the head. But the way in which he was insane had a tendency to shift around.

Brinepaw watched as Fleetwater's claws slid out from their sockets and raked the ground. The tom's breathing grew more and more deranged. "Stop," pleaded Brinepaw, feeling the fear begin to take hold of him.

Fleetwater started to laugh again. "Our clan was nearly destroyed because of you! Maybe... maybe we'd be safer if you were dead."

It was a horrible experience for Brinepaw, to hear his crazy father say exactly what he'd been thinking himself. Maybe they *would* be safer.

But no, he was sure there was something deeper going on. The war, the visions, his powers... they all had to lead somewhere.

Brinepaw gulped. "You're wrong," he mewed shakily, "I am here for a reason. What that reason is, I'm not sure. But I'll find out soon enough."

Fleetwater stared right through him. He started to approach.

Brinepaw pulled some water from the air and raised it above his head, ready to strike down.

Fleetwater lumbered closer. His steps were uneven.

Brinepaw wondered if he would kill him if it came to it.

Then Fleetwater attacked. He knocked Brinepaw off the trunk of the fallen maple and pinned him to the leaf-littered ground. Brinepaw huffed in surprise as the breath left his body. Regaining his composure, he saw Fleetwater's disturbed face looming over him. He drooled from every part of his mouth. Brinepaw slashed the water across Fleetwater's face, leaving a deep cut. Blood poured from the cut, falling onto Brinepaw's face and into his mouth. It stung his eyes. He suddenly couldn't see anything. He suddenly began to panic and the water splashed onto the ground beside him.

Fleetwater tried to kill him that day. Every time before had been like a game. Because before, Fleetwater had only wanted to hurt him. But now, in the middle of the woods, Fleetwater wanted

something different. He wanted to feel his son's blood flowing. He wanted to taste it on the tip of his tongue. He wanted to know what it was like to kill an innocent cat. And now was his chance.

He left Brinepaw in pieces. By the time Fleetwater lurched away into the bushes, Brinepaw was so traumatized that he could not even attempt to move. He just stared into the greenery and watched Fleetwater disappear. His flesh had been shredded, his fur ripped apart. He bled from his neck and his belly and his legs. A little trickle of red spilled from his mouth onto the brown dirt. He stayed completely still, incapable of thought.

But he did not die.

Despite everything, he did not die. He waited for it. He prepared. He was thankful that his last moments had been spent in the forest, and he was thankful that he had rediscovered—if only for a moment—the joy of living. But, somehow, those were not his last moments. Brinepaw, apprentice of TideClan, narrowly avoided death for what seemed like the hundredth time in the past couple of days.

It was a miracle, no doubt. Much like the time he'd thrown himself off the cliff and Ghost had healed him. But Ghost was nowhere to be seen. This was a miracle that had just happened on its own. Or, maybe, StarClan was watching. Brinepaw wondered if it could be true.

It was at this time that the second cat appeared. Brinepaw was almost too shell-shocked to hear her coming. But then his ear twitched at a rustle in the vegetation and he picked up his head.

There was a pure white pelt through the leaves.

thirteen

The pure white figure was bright and angelic as it came forward. Brinepaw could not discern who it was, but he didn't really care. His mind was still blank.

It was a she-cat. She went to stand over him. Brinepaw watched her slowly come into focus. She looked like a cloud. Her fur was soft and tufty, like wisps of creamy fog. Brinepaw wanted to touch her white coat and feel what it was like on his paws. He tried to reach out, but pain jolted through his leg and he let it fall back to the earth. But she was so beautiful, and something about her being there calmed him. He wanted to see her... *truly* see her. There was an extended silence as he waited patiently for the trauma to fade and his full vision to be restored. When at last it was, he could see the definition of each of her individual white hairs. His gaze trailed up to her face, and he was surprised to find that her eyes cut through him like sharp blue ice.

"Milkpaw!"

All of Brinepaw's hope crumbled at once. He could feel anger surging up from someplace deep inside him. He turned away, refusing to look at the she-cat.

Milkpaw bent down and brought her face closer to his. "Brinepaw, are you okay?"

The words disgusted him, though he wasn't sure why. Brinepaw's stomach clenched and he began to feel sick. Suddenly, he convulsed and retched onto the dark brown dirt. A thin stream of vomit poured out of his mouth and its sour smell populated the space around them.

Milkpaw gasped and laid her tail on Brinepaw's spine, "You're sick. Don't move. Just take the time you need to feel better."

Part of Brinepaw wanted to scream at her to leave, to just

shut up and go away... but he didn't have the strength. So he ignored her as another cascade of pinkish vomit forced its way up his throat and fell onto the forest floor.

He felt her tail stroke the length his back. He guessed the gesture was meant to soothe him, but it only made him tense up. He bunched up all his muscles as he lay there, terrified. Milkpaw was comforting him with little phrases of encouragement, but he couldn't decipher them. The more he tried to figure out what she was saying, the more muddled her speech seemed to become. He gave up trying and prayed for her to take her tail off his back.

Thankfully, she raised her tail and rounded on him. "I'm going to go get some cobwebs," she whispered, "Stay here."

It's not like I can really go anywhere, Brinepaw thought bitterly.

The next few minutes felt surreal. Brinepaw's eyes followed Milkpaw as she traveled around the clearing. From far away, she looked like a sphere of white smoke. Brinepaw pretended that she *was* just a ball of smoke, and it made him feel a little bit better. She disappeared for a while into the forest, and suddenly panic edged its way into Brinepaw's body. He hated himself for it, but he anxiously awaited her return.

What if she leaves me here?

But despite his fears, Milkpaw returned just a few moments later. She was carrying a huge mass of cobwebs. "Okay," she purred, setting them down when she got to him, "Where should I start?"

Brinepaw just stared at her.

Milkpaw stared back. When he still didn't reply, she grunted with some annoyance and began tending to his underbelly. She pressed the sticky webs into his wounds very gently, but Brinepaw winced in pain. "Sorry," murmured Milkpaw, "I'm doing the best I can."

"Can't you just go get my sister?" Brinepaw asked.

"I will," Milkpaw assured him, "But I need to make sure you're alright first."

Brinepaw groaned and pressed his face into the dusty earth. He closed his eyes and tried to picture Fawnpaw with her white-dappled fur and lively green eyes.

After what seemed like forever, Milkpaw said, "Done!" and backed away proudly.

Brinepaw opened his eyes again and saw that he wasn't bleeding nearly as much. She'd done a good job. But for some reason he couldn't bring himself to tell her. So he just nodded and sighed.

Milkpaw was observing him closely. Her sea blue eyes brimmed with curiosity. "So... what exactly happened?"

"What do you mean?" Brinepaw responded hesitantly, narrowing his eyes a little.

The snowy apprentice took a step forward and looked down upon him. "Between you and Fleetwater. What happened?"

He was rather taken aback, and he could feel his anger surfacing again. "Nothing *happened*. We just don't get along," he answered vaguely.

By the way she looked at him, Brinepaw could tell that Milkpaw didn't believe a word he was saying. She seemed confused. But like always, she was also ceaselessly interested in him. She wanted to know who he was. Brinepaw became lost in thought as he watched Milkpaw's long fur ripple in a passing wind. How strange it was to have somebody so invested in his story.

Something occurred to him. "How long were you watching us, exactly?"

"I followed you out of camp," mewed Milkpaw, but she immediately regretted it. Her face froze with shame.

Brinepaw was stung. "So... you saw everything."

Milkpaw looked upset now.

Brinepaw felt like something inside him had shattered. His voice broke as he said, "Why didn't you *help* me?"

"I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because Fleetwater is way stronger than me!" Milkpaw cried. She looked scared.

"Together, we could have beat him."

Milkpaw set her jaw. Her gaze was cold. "You're wrong," she said.

Milkpaw's typical, unsettling demeanor had resumed. She seemed to believe she'd regained control of her situation. But Brinepaw saw through her lies. He could feel a revelation speeding towards him at alarming speed. What had he uncovered?

He pushed a little further. "It's obvious that you and me could have beat him, Milkpaw. So, if you knew that, why did you hide in the shadows and watch my own father nearly tear me apart?"

His voice was ragged with agony, and he knew he should stay quiet and rest. But he was so *close*. Milkpaw gave him a look of resentment.

"Tell me, Milkpaw. Why didn't you help me when you had the chance?"

Milkpaw's eyes were suddenly shining with tears. "Whatever you think of me, Brinepaw, you're wrong. I'm not a bad cat. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not I'm not I'm not I'm–"

Her words devolved into hysteria and she began to hyperventilate. Brinepaw felt no pity. It was a good impersonation of hysteria, he decided, but not the real thing. No, this was an emotion she'd studied for moons. And now she replicated it here, when she needed it most.

Slowly, her breathing relaxed. She stood with her forelegs splayed apart in another convincing imitation of what it looks like to be distressed. She bowed her head and flattened her velvety white ears to her head. "I'm sorry, Brinepaw. I was just so afraid. I was so, so afraid."

Brinepaw realized it was growing dark. The sun was completely gone. The trees overhead crept inwards, casting long shadows that fell across the ground and over Milkpaw's face. The sky was painted with a sinister shade of lavender and everything seemed to be swathed in a layer of night.

They'd been there almost the entire day. Brinepaw took a deep breath.

"Just go away, Milkpaw. I won't hold anything against you if you just go away now. Thank you for bringing me these cobwebs. And thank you for essentially saving my life. I am grateful to you. But you're bad for me, Milkpaw. I'm not sure what you think this is between us, but all it's ever done is cause me problems."

"No!" Milkpaw protested. Her eyes flitted to the ground. "No," she repeated more softly, "I don't think you understand. I'm *in love* with you, Brinepaw."

It felt as if all the air had been knocked from his lungs. Brinepaw gaped at her as his head began to spin. Love? Why was she talking about love all of a sudden? Hadn't it been just a crush? They were so young, after all. Surely she was kidding when she said *love*. Brinepaw wasn't even sure he knew what love was. What right did Milkpaw have to talk to him about love?

He was almost convinced she was telling the truth. But then he took one last glance at her eyes.

There was something about them that disturbed him still. There was no depth to her eyes. There was no complexity. Even now, with all this talk of love, her emotions seemed fake, like she'd stolen them from someone else.

And there was so much fascination in those eyes.

So *that's* what it was! It came to him like a feather on the breeze. Milkpaw wasn't in love with him. She didn't care about him. She wasn't interested in what he had to say or what he was thinking. She was in love with the *idea* of him. She was in love with his pain.

Brinepaw had always loathed that fascination. Now he understood why. To her, he was a mystery just waiting to be unraveled. He was beautifully vulnerable. He was the broken image of a cat that could've, in another lifetime, been happy. There was something about his struggle to survive that captivated her. There was something about the way he wanted to die that made her burst with joy. Because maybe... maybe *she* could be the one to fix him. Or maybe not. It didn't really matter.

Brinepaw smirked a little. He'd figured it out. He picked up his head and held her unnerving gaze. "Don't make a fool of yourself, Milkpaw," he said with a wild grin, "I know who you are."

Milkpaw opened her mouth to speak.

But Brinepaw was gone before she could make a sound. He pushed himself to his feet and padded away into the darkening tree line. His body throbbed. Bits of bloody cobweb fell from his sides and splatted onto the ground. But he kept moving. He kept going. He needed to get away.

His paws carried him for a long time before Brinepaw remembered what he was doing. He regained awareness and noticed that there was a large tree ahead of him. It was the Saltwater Elm. He approached the elm tree with caution. *There must be a reason I am here,* he thought. But when he tried to think of what had brought him there he could only remember his mind being completely and utterly blank.

He leaned against the sturdy trunk and watched the stars begin to appear in the sky. They dotted the black expanse like a sprinkling of fresh snow. Brinepaw panted, feeling the support of the hard wood against his aching body. He sighed and allowed his eyes to close. The sound of crickets rose up all around him. He felt connected to StarClan, somehow, underneath the open sky.

Underneath the winding branches of the Saltwater Elm and surrounded by the coming night, he felt serene. Protected. Indeed, he felt that StarClan was right there with him.

And maybe they were. After all, he'd survived Fleetwater's attack. And he'd escaped Milkpaw. He'd been surprised that she hadn't followed him, but he was thankful for it, too. He thought of her striking blue eyes and found that they had no effect on him. He smiled to himself. She no longer frightened him.

It was a beautiful moment. Brinepaw experienced the same blissful feeling that he'd had in the forest. He could feel his heart opening, like a butterfly spreading its wings. He looked down at his bleeding chest and stomach, but it didn't bother him in the slightest. He was feeling better now. He would live; that was all that mattered. He would live.

He wouldn't go back to camp that night, Brinepaw decided. He knew that Fleetwater would be shocked to see him, and Brinepaw wasn't ready to deal with him yet. *I will spend the night here, underneath the careful watch of the Saltwater Elm.*

As he lay down, he truly felt as though the tree were watching him. He snuggled up to its trunk and did his best to get comfortable.

It was unbelievable clear. Above him, countless stars were visible, and the land was so open that the sky stretched on forever in all directions. Brinepaw felt peaceful. He kept his gaze trained on the stars for a long time. That is, until he noticed the moon over the faraway water.

The ocean was distant, but Brinepaw could just make it out. And he could hear the waves. They filled him with an unexpected longing for home.

And the moon was just a tiny sliver in the great spread of black. It was a new moon, just beginning the waxing cycle that would eventually bring the two clans together for their next full moon gathering. Brinepaw hoped that by then, the conflict between TideClan and WaveClan would be resolved.

This past moon had been the strangest experience of his life, and yet Brinepaw felt that it had invigorated him with a new sense of purpose. He wanted the two clans to get along. He wanted to continue with his training. He wanted to become a warrior.

Brinepaw began to cry underneath the Saltwater Elm. He was so relieved. So relieved that life finally had meaning.

A weak light appeared above him. Brinepaw glanced up.

Ghost was sitting on a branch of the tree. He blinked fondly at Brinepaw.

Brinepaw sniffed and got to his paws, "Ghost!"

"Home," Ghost said to him, "This is your home."

Brinepaw recalled the last time he'd heard those words. It had been on his way back from his training session with Bluepaw. Brinepaw's fur stood on end, "That was you!" he breathed, "You've been watching me since before I fell from the cliff!"

Ghost nodded in confirmation.

"But why?" questioned Brinepaw.

The translucent tom looked frustrated by something. He shook his head sadly, "I don't know."

"You must know!"

"I don't know," Ghost insisted, "Believe me, I wish I did. I wish I could help you, Brinepaw. And I'm... I'm trying so hard."

"Why? Why do you care so much?" Brinepaw's eyes were flooded with tears again.

When Ghost had no answer, Brinepaw broke down into choked sobs. He held his face in the grass with his forepaws and thought about how happy he was and how confused he was and how he never would have felt this way if he'd died after jumping from the cliff. He thought about the finality of death and the gift of

being alive.

Ghost floated down from the tree and embraced Brinepaw.

It was an odd feeling, to be hugged by a spirit. But Brinepaw held him close and didn't let go.

Brinepaw's sobs faded to snoring and soon he was asleep.

fourteen

The morning light painted the open moor with golden streaks as Brinepaw slowly woke up. Ghost was gone. The fields were empty except for a few pink and white butterflies that floated on the wind. Brinepaw felt strangely calm, despite everything that had happened in the day before. Sleeping with Ghost watching over him had been easy and comfortable. He'd felt safe, almost like Ghost were his protector in this world. And maybe he was.

The question of who exactly Ghost was didn't bother Brinepaw as much anymore. Something inside him told him that all would be revealed in time. He was beginning to see that. Things have a way of working out. The world isn't inherently bad. In fact, the world isn't inherently anything. It just is. It's the living things that determine its future.

When Brinepaw realized this, it made him feel much better because it seemed to him that nothing really mattered in the way he'd once thought it did. He couldn't change the land. He couldn't change his clanmates. But he could most definitely change himself. And that in and of itself was a profound amount of power to be allocated to a single cat.

Now here he was. The plains were all around, like a rolling sea of flaxen grass. He could feel the energy pulsating through his veins. His body was still scratched and beaten, but mentally he felt more able than ever. It was time to go.

Fleetwater couldn't keep him out forever. Brinepaw would return to camp and confront him. He smirked as he lay in the grass. It was like he'd been set free. Now he could take back all of the moons that Fleetwater had stolen from him. Now he could finally reveal the truth to his clan.

His father wasn't an honorable warrior. He wasn't kind or wise or any of the things that he pretended to be. TideClan needed to know. Maybe then there would be some justice.

Brinepaw got to his feet with a sudden burst of determination. He strode confidently away from the Saltwater Elm, imagining his arrival to camp. Everyone would be shocked to see him, most of all Fleetwater. And what would Covestorm say?

The thought of facing his mentor made Brinepaw stop in his tracks. He pictured Covestorm's resolute expression and his deep-set orange eyes. No. He couldn't tell Covestorm what had happened. It would destroy him.

Brinepaw paused there for a long time. Somehow he knew he wouldn't be moving again for a while, so he sat down. His heart was torn along two paths. He wanted so desperately to tell Covestorm the truth. But he also wanted to spare his mentor the pain. It was a complex feeling.

His contemplation was interrupted by the sound of pawsteps on the grass behind him. Brinepaw whirled around to see two cats standing under the Saltwater Elm. His fur stood on end as he stared at them, wide-eyed. He was surprised he hadn't scented them, but then again he had been so lost in thought.

He recognized them both. There was an apprentice with feathery gray fur that seemed to come alive in the breeze, rippling like a puddle of clear water. It was Plumpaw.

The other cat, Brinepaw could barely bring himself to look at. She was a large mottled tabby. Where her eyes should have been, there were two sunken hollows. The expression on her face was that of a cat who had suffered a tremendous deal. Her face was contorted and miserable. Brinepaw stood up slowly, completely and utterly stunned.

"Is he here?" asked Whitefin, pink nose in the air, "I-I think I can smell him."

"Yes," Plumpaw responded, "He's here."

Brinepaw was at a loss for words. There were a million things racing through his head at once. Finally, he spluttered, "What are you *doing* here?"

He expected Whitefin to look angry, but she only grew very sad. "We were looking for you, Brinepaw," she said, "Because I need your help."

Brinepaw gazed into the black pits that were her eye sockets, disgusted. He could feel his breath rising. She was otherwise quite beautiful. Her fur was silky and thick and her markings splattered her white coat in a wonderful and colorful arrangement. But those eyes of darkness... they communicated a kind of turmoil only she had experienced. Brinepaw could not look at her for long. Not while also knowing that he was the creator of that turmoil.

Whitefin gritted her teeth, "I need you, Brinepaw. I need you to fix what you've done to me. Please."

At her side, Plumpaw was nodding his head sadly.

Brinepaw shook his head. "I'm sorry for what happened, Whitefin. I really am. And if I could take it back, I would. But there's nothing I can do now."

Plumpaw jumped forward, "That's not true!" he cried, "I saw how you saved that warrior by the border stream! You pulled the water right out of his body."

He was talking about Covestorm. Brinepaw remembered how relieved he'd been when his mentor had survived. He flicked his tail at the WaveClan apprentice, "Yes," he said, "But this is very different."

"How?"

"Well, for one, her injury has nothing to do with water."

"You caused it using water."

Brinepaw was getting annoyed now. He felt his pelt begin to bristle. "True. But that doesn't mean I can just reverse the damage. It doesn't work like that."

Plumpaw snarled frustratedly, "Then how *does* it work?"

"I'm not entirely sure, to be honest."

The dove-gray apprentice let out a low growl, "Then isn't there some possibility... that you could be wrong?"

It was a challenge. Brinepaw looked Plumpaw in his hazel eyes. There was fury burning inside of those ginger irises. There was hatred, even. Brinepaw felt a little uneasy. He hadn't known Plumpaw for long, but in the time that he had known him he'd found him to be a rather compassionate cat. It was amazing how quickly things could change. It was even more amazing how much Brinepaw's relationships had changed since the full moon. He was no longer just an apprentice of TideClan. Now he was the cat with the ability to bend water.

Before Brinepaw could reply, Plumpaw continued, "You've hurt two of the cats I love most, Brinepaw. First my brother, Nightpaw. And now you've hurt my mentor. There has to be something you can do for her. You have to make this right."

Whitefin was shaking. Brinepaw wanted to looked away again but this time he couldn't.

"Please," the she-cat rasped, "Please just try. I don't want to live like this anymore."

Something struck like lightning through Brinepaw's soul. He'd felt that way before. "Okay," he agreed, "I'll try. But please don't get your hopes up. I don't think I could stand to disappoint you."

Whitefin nodded weakly as Brinepaw stepped forward. Plumpaw moved off to one side and watched closely. Brinepaw took a deep breath.

He watched her face intensely. She was still shaking. She was afraid of him. Brinepaw could understand why, but it made him unhappy all the same. He'd broken her. That much was clear. Her life hadn't been the same since the battle.

You're hurt, thought Brinepaw as he studied her.

She stiffened as he grew very near.

I am going to try and help you, Brinepaw promised silently.

He drew power from the surrounding landscape. He could feel the moon in the sky, though it wasn't visible. A cool wave of calm washed over him as he closed his eyes, preserving the image of Whitefin's grisly face in his mind. He called for his powers to come. Water saturated the air. He pulled it into two rotating spheres.

Brinepaw wasn't sure exactly what he was doing, but he brought the water to Whitefin's demolished eyes. He allowed it to rest there. She squirmed a little uncomfortably, for the water was very cold. But Brinepaw held it there for several minutes.

In his mind, he felt that he could see things and feel the movement of the water, but there was no physical representation of what was happening. Everything was dark, and yet he was fully aware. It was as if he were experiencing a different kind of sight. A deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the events that were transpiring. Everything that happened, he grasped with immense detail.

And then it was happening. The water began to glow a shimmery blue, then a soft lilac, then a deep purple. Brinepaw opened his eyes, astounded. He did his best to maintain his focus as the water danced with the colors of the ocean over Whitefin's face. The white-pelted warrior inhaled sharply, as if she could feel the process working.

The water swirled and scattered the light of the sun. Brinepaw focused harder. He could scarcely contain his excitement.

It's working! It's working!

And indeed it was. As the movement of the water slowed, something could be seen forming behind its transparent covering.

Ice blue eyes.

The water dropped in slow-motion onto the grass. Its colorful luminosity had faded.

When everything was over, Whitefin's cheeks were wet. And instead

of the black hollows there were two beautiful, gleaming blue eyes. Plumpaw gasped.

Brinepaw felt dizzy. He swayed on his paws. Plumpaw rushed to his side and supported his weight. Together, the two apprentices looked up at Whitefin, awaiting her reaction.

She was dead silent. Brinepaw thought he could hear her heart pounding.

Plumpaw tensed against him.

At last, Whitefin spoke.

Her voice was very soft. Barely audible.

"I can *see*."

The joy on her face was evident, though it was mixed with a fair amount of confusion. She surveyed the plains, turning all around. She paused for a moment to admire the majesty of the Saltwater Elm. And when she turned around again to face the toms, she was beaming.

Brinepaw bounced up and down. "Really? Really?"

Whitefin bounced too. "Yes!"

Plumpaw's eyes were huge. "Great StarClan!"

Relief exploded in Brinepaw's chest. He had done it after all. He'd stolen her vision, but now he had brought it back. He gazed into those chilly blue depths and saw the purity of her happiness. She had forgiven him.

She brushed his cheek with hers. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"I can't believe it," Brinepaw breathed.

"Brinepaw," Whitefin meowed, "I was wrong about you. Adderstar was wrong about you. You aren't a monster. You don't want to hurt

anyone. I'm sorry for attacking you. I was only doing what I'd been told, but that's no excuse. I should have questioned Adderstar's decision to attack your camp. And I promise, going forward, Plumpaw and I will advocate for you. We will put an end to this war."

Plumpaw murmured in agreement.

Brinepaw felt like he was floating. He smiled at them fondly. "Thank you," he mewed, "Thank you very much. Together, I'm sure we can bring about peace."

They shared a moment, exchanging breath in a tight space. For a second, Brinepaw felt they were part of the same clan, the same family. They were one underneath the realm of StarClan. After all, these cats were no different from him or his clanmates. They were all just warriors in a land of mysteries, trying to find their way.

With heavy hearts, they said goodbye. And as Brinepaw waited for Whitefin and Plumpaw to disappear into the distance, he recalled what it was he had to do. The issue of Fleetwater. The issue of Covestorm. It was time to tell his mentor everything he'd endured. It was the only way.

When the WaveClan cats were gone, Brinepaw headed out for camp. He tried to retain this feeling of bravery so that when at last he returned home, he would be able to follow through with his plan. It would be difficult. But nothing had ever not been difficult for Brinepaw. He was prepared.

As he went, he mulled over everything that had happened with the WaveClan visitors. He played the events over and over again in his head. And every time he got to the part with the water, something bothered him. He wasn't sure what it was until he remembered back to that night under the cliff.

Brinepaw remembered how broken he'd been, and how insistent he'd been on dying. But before he could sink away to StarClan, Ghost had appeared and brought forth the water.

"I'm not a figment of your imagination!"

"Then what are you? A StarClan warrior?"

"No. Not yet, anyway."

Maybe...

Could it be?

Brinepaw wanted to stop thinking about it now. But he couldn't. He'd gone too far.

Ghost had the power to control water. Ghost had the power to heal. And on that night, underneath the gigantic ocean moon, Ghost had saved his life.

Ghost had said he wasn't a StarClan warrior.

But he would become one.

Was he trapped in some stage between life and death?

Was he a tormented spirit with an unresolved purpose?

Perhaps so.

Perhaps he was just as his name suggested. A ghost.

And one ghost in particular.

The ghost of Brinepaw himself.

fifteen

The appearance of russet red boulders on the horizon almost made Brinepaw leap with joy. He was nearly home. He began to step more quickly, eager to get back to his clanmates. Covestorm would be there, waiting for him. And Burnetpaw would be there, too. Brinepaw could picture his friend's cheerful face, decorated by umber-toned markings and long whiskers.

Now his patience was ebbing. He walked faster still.

He did not fear what awaited him. As much as Brinepaw didn't want to tell Covestorm the truth, he knew there was no way out of it. He focused his bronze gaze on the land ahead, steadfast and determined.

It was almost midday, the sun rising high over a blanket of fluffy clouds. Brinepaw's mind wandered away from the image of his father back to Ghost. Part of him couldn't wait for the tom to reappear again, so that he could share what news he'd learned.

It seemed so obvious now. How could he not have known before? Ghost's eyes were so familiar. His mannerisms, his style of speech, everything about him was a parallel of Brinepaw's own personality. Brinepaw felt foolish now, realizing what had been in front of him all along.

But then again, maybe it *wasn't* so obvious. There were still so many mysteries that baffled Brinepaw. Why couldn't Ghost remember anything? Why was he here in the first place?

Brinepaw was beginning to feel overwhelmed by his situation. The view of the distant camp blurred as he began to wonder if there had been some mistake. StarClan was clearly trying to communicate something by granting him these powers. But he was only an apprentice. And a bad one, at that. Why couldn't they have chosen someone else?

With these thoughts turning over in his head, Brinepaw pressed on. His strides became more and more aggressive, more and more defined. There was a reason. There had to be. And in the meantime, Brinepaw had no choice but to accept the heavy burden that had been placed upon his shoulders.

He would carry it. He'd grown stronger lately. Brinepaw had found that he'd started to unlock his full potential. His smarts and his skills had been pressed down inside him for moons and moons. But now, all that was ending.

Maybe I am capable of something.

The fact that this thought came to him put a smile on Brinepaw's face. He'd never so earnestly believed in himself, as he did now. Silently he thanked StarClan for showing him the way.

In a way, it was sad. It was sad that he'd needed his powers to realize the goodness that had been inside him all along. But it had been necessary. Brinepaw knew that his state of mind had been deteriorating all through his life. It'd reached a critical point not long before the gathering. And then he'd almost destroyed his chance at true happiness, but Ghost had given him a second try.

The boulders were looming now in the hot sun. They cast long shadows on the sand. Brinepaw could make out figures in the camp. As he grew ever closer to what was sure to be the hardest conversation of his life, Brinepaw remembered what Ghost had promised that night under the cliff. He'd said that Brinepaw would be thankful for being saved.

And oh how he was.

He was thankful.

It'd seemed impossible at the time. And yet here he was now, underneath the scorching sun, almost gliding on his feet.

Brinepaw knew he still had a long way to go. He was growing more and more aware of himself. His life wasn't normal. It never had been. Ordinary cats didn't live this way: in constant fear

of their family, tiptoeing around their own personalities. This new knowledge was monumental to him. For the first time ever, Brinepaw understood that there was something better.

And now he could hear them. His clanmates, meowing loudly as they moved about camp. He crested a small rise and blinked as he took a good look at his home. It looked glorious to him in the light.

But his positivity was crushed underneath the weight of the air. Something was terribly wrong. The sand was packed with fast-moving bodies. Brinepaw recognized the lean figure of Baycrash sprinting into the medicine cat's den. He saw Skymask's soft gray pelt flash by in a flurry of panic. On top of the Red Cliff, Cedarfrost was conspiring in a low voice with Almondstar. The leader's aqua eyes flared to life and she immediately dropped from the cliff onto the sand. Her gaze wandered over to the base of the warriors' den, where a black-furred tom lay disturbingly still.

His dark coat had a silver sheen to it in the sun. Brinepaw could hear the blood pumping in his ears as everything around him slowed and he drew nearer to the body. Baycrash emerged from the medicine cat's den, followed by Sandfire and Fawnpaw. The scrawny beige medicine cat went to stand stiffly at the warrior's side. Fawnpaw stayed behind her mentor. She was shaking in fear.

Baycrash gasped when she noticed Brinepaw approaching. She stepped back to let him pass.

Suddenly the entire clan was gathered in a circle around the den. Brinepaw had stopped putting names to faces. Now his clanmates were just jumbled shapes and colors that seemed familiar to him, yet could not be identified. Just like this tom that lay propped up against the outside wall of the warriors' den, whom Brinepaw was sure he knew. But no matter how hard he grasped for one, no name came to mind.

There were no memories, either. Even when Brinepaw was so close he could scent the tom's shallow breath, no memories came to him. The warrior's pale amber eyes opened ever so slightly.

Brinepaw understood that he was dying. With every weak, tired breath out, the sheen on the warrior tom's pelt fled across his side again. And with every breath in, it retracted back from where it had gone and returned to the center of his flank. Brinepaw watched this happen several times over.

He was stopped beside Sandfire, the dark warrior at both of their feet. Things came in and out of focus for Brinepaw. In a moment of visual clarity, he observed that there was blood pouring from the warrior's throat.

Sandfire's voice startled Brinepaw out of his daze. "I'm sorry," mewed the beach-colored tom, "But I don't think there's anything I can do."

Brinepaw glanced past him to where Fawnpaw still stood shivering. He met his sister's eyes with no trace of empathy. He began to feel more present and the feeling of floating stopped. He took the opportunity to look back down at the tom and confirm his suspicions.

And indeed, he had suspected correctly. The cat lying at this paws was none other than his very own father, Fleetwater.

Fawnpaw let out a cry of despair and hurried away. Brinepaw did not run after her. He could feel many pairs of eyes on him. He knew everyone was waiting for what he would do next. But he would not react how they wanted him to. He would not grieve.

Fleetwater was fading fast. His eyes kept flickering up to meet his son's, but he could not speak. It did not matter. Brinepaw knew what he would say. He would ask Brinepaw how he was still alive.

Brinepaw did not smile, but he wasn't frowning, either. He would not rejoice over his father's death. And he would not grieve.

So he remained there for a few more minutes as Fleetwater traversed the hazy line between life and death. It occurred to Brinepaw that he could heal him, but he did not think another second on the possibility. It would not happen.

The blood continued to flow. He was losing a lot, and he was losing it quickly.

Tension permeated the air as Brinepaw's clanmates watched in horror. They expected him to say something, he realized. But as he looked down upon the cat that had tortured him since his youth, Brinepaw knew he had nothing to say.

And so Fleetwater died in perfect silence, underneath the stone-cold gaze of his long-time victim.

Brinepaw continued to stand over his abuser's body. An off-shore breeze blew through his fur.

A gentle voice addressed the crowd behind him, "Okay, everybody, that's enough. Give him some space."

There was some murmuring as the group disbanded. Brinepaw did not listen to them. He did not watch them go. He remained where he was, wondering how he could feel so little pity for the fallen TideClan warrior.

The apprentice inspected the wound on Fleetwater's throat. It was a clean blow, straight across the jugular. Red still drained from the slice and fell to stain the earth.

There was a muted slapping of paws on the packed sand behind him. Soon Covestorm was at his side. Together, they sat with death at their forepaws.

Finally, Covestorm rumbled, "And so, just like that, he's gone."

"Yes. Just like that."

His mentor sucked in a breath of air and cast a glance past the warriors' den, out to sea. The wind was picking up, pulling white-capped waves onto the beach. Ruffled gray clouds danced like the feathers of seagulls on the faraway horizon. There would be another storm.

It felt like another nightmare. The storm front was bringing

white lightning and sheets of icy newleaf rain. They would sleep cold tonight.

"He must've been very unhappy."

Brinepaw tore his eyes away from Fleetwater's motionless corpse and looked to his mentor with a confused expression. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if he went so far as to do this to himself, I can't imagine he was very happy."

So now it made sense. Brinepaw resumed his examination of his father's remains. The fatal slash that traveled the width of his neck was self-inflicted. Of course. No cat had killed him but himself.

It was weird because Brinepaw had never considered his father's emotions. He wasn't sure why, because everything made much more sense now. He looked deep into Fleetwater's gray, shadowed irises. They were empty, but no more empty than they had been when he was still alive. So that was it, then. There had been pain in his life. There had been shame, and fire, and probably a fair amount of self-hatred. Brinepaw cringed at how much of himself could be found inside of his father's evil soul.

But he would not grieve.

Covestorm's tail swept the sand as he sat down. "I've never lost a parent," he mused, "But I imagine that it's very hard."

Brinepaw sat down too. "No," he said firmly, "It's not too bad."

He could tell his mentor was shocked, though he hid it well. Covestorm's ears perked up and he replied with a simple, "Oh? Why's that?"

"I never considered Fleetwater my dad," Brinepaw admitted.

"I see. Tell me more."

Brinepaw proceeded to tell Covestorm everything. It was

hard at first, but then everything began to spill out, faster and faster until the entire story was over and Brinepaw didn't know what to say next. They must have been there for a very long time, because by the time he was finished, the incoming clouds were moving over the beach and into camp.

Covestorm was at a loss for words. Brinepaw could tell he was grasping for something to say.

Finally, his mentor sighed. The look on his face was dark. "I knew there was something off about that tom."

"Really?"

"Yes, yes. He always gave me this uneasy feeling in my gut. I couldn't pinpoint why, but I guess now I know." Covestorm bowed his head solemnly. He gritted his teeth.

Brinepaw felt unreasonably uncomfortable. He shuffled in his seated position, wondering what to do next.

His black tabby mentor stood and shook out his fur. His tail swished into the air. He lashed it angrily to one side, "I should have *done* something."

"You didn't know." Brinepaw pointed out.

"But I *did*. I could tell something was wrong. Why didn't I act on it?" Covestorm unsheathed his claws and dug them into the sand. He growled under his breath.

Brinepaw's bronze eyes widened, "It's fine, Covestorm! You've done more for me than any other cat in this clan. Besides, it's unrealistic to expect yourself to be aware of everything that's going on. Especially something like this, when it's so personal to me and my family."

But there was so much sorrow burning in his mentor's orange gaze, it was almost hard to argue with him. "I should have been there for you, Brinepaw. I should have stopped him." Covestorm whisked around and slammed a paw into the ground. A clap of thunder rolled overhead and shook the camp.

"No. Please don't blame yourself," pleaded Brinepaw, "If it weren't for you and your support, I wouldn't be here today."

Part of him wanted to bite his tongue and hold back, but Brinepaw could see that Covestorm needed this comfort from him. It felt strange to express himself so freely to his mentor, but Brinepaw supposed this conversation had been a long time coming.

Covestorm turned again and his eyes flickered over his apprentice's beaten frame. "And is this why you're covered in scratches? Is this why you were missing last night?"

Brinepaw nodded.

"I'll never forgive myself."

"You have to," Brinepaw insisted, "Please. I don't want to live knowing that I've caused you this hurt."

But the big tom shook his head, "I've got nobody to blame for this but myself, Brinepaw."

The TideClan apprentice couldn't take anymore. He stamped all four of his paws into the ground and stood with purpose. "Covestorm, look at me."

Covestorm did as he was told. He looked as powerful as ever in the evening light. Suddenly a wash of rain poured from the sky and the background was illuminated by a bright flash of lightning.

The storm encapsulated the entire world. It seemed that there was not a corner of the earth that could be touched by the sun. Land and sky melded together into a single gray void. One could not discern what was up or down. Every direction appeared exactly the same. It was the kind of night that swallowed cats whole. Once lost, it was impossible to get found again.

Brinepaw watched as Covestorm was soaked by the falling rain. The entire camp was empty now. Cats had gone about their business as the apprentice and mentor had talked, and now all the patrols were home for the night. Every cat had taken shelter from the freezing rainstorm and now lay tucked in the warmth of their

dens.

But apprentice and mentor stayed outside. Brinepaw was beginning to get chilled. He had to shout over the noise of the falling water. "Covestorm!" he yelled.

"Yes!" Covestorm yelled back.

Brinepaw focused his mind. His thoughts were drowning in the sound of whooshing rain and wind. But as he searched for peace, he came upon it. He used the momentary quiet to take control of the rain that was falling around him. He cleared the space between him and his mentor, so that the droplets did not touch either of them. Instead, they fell onto an invisible barrier and drained off into the ground.

In their dry bubble, it was quiet. Brinepaw could hear his mentor's breath again.

The fur on Covestorm's broad shoulders was slicked back by wet. His whiskers drooped with rainwater that cascaded down their silky lengths.

After all these moons, it was time.

"Covestorm, you are more like a father to me than he ever was."

"Goodnight!"

The whisper came from outside the wall of the apprentices' den, where the noise of the rain could still be heard. Brinepaw turned his head back ever so slightly, "Goodnight!" he responded.

The sound of Covestorm's paws faded and then vanished completely as he went to go sleep in his own den. Brinepaw turned back to the interior of the den and surveyed the sleeping shapes of his clanmates. He was immediately drawn to Milkpaw, who was snoozing by her sister, against the side of the den. They were curled up tight. It occurred to Brinepaw that Bunnypaw was probably the

only cat that Milkpaw truly loved. It made him happy to see that she had someone.

Then there was Bluepaw, dozing quietly at the center. The tiny tom had been unusually introverted since Rainflight's passing. Cedarfrost was his new mentor, a strong and distinguished warrior, but nothing could replicate the bond that Bluepaw had shared with Rainflight. It would take a long time for the apprentice to heal, Brinepaw assumed. Such an influential loss doesn't disappear overnight.

And finally, Burnetpaw. He was in the nest by Brinepaw's, in the back. His breathing pattern told Brinepaw that he was still awake.

The large apprentice stepped over Bluepaw and made his way to the back wall of the den. He settled into his bed.

Burnetpaw lifted his chin, just as Brinepaw knew he would.

"How are you?" asked his friend.

"I'm okay," Brinepaw said truthfully.

Burnetpaw nudged him, "If you want to talk about it, I'm here."

Brinepaw shook his head, "No, I think I'd rather just sleep."

"Alright."

So he curled into a ball and sank deeper into the moss. There was still thunder outside. It shook the floor of the den gently. Brinepaw opened his eyes and rolled over, closer to Burnetpaw. They cuddled up side by side and began to drift off to sleep.

"He wasn't a good dad," Brinepaw breathed softly.

Burnetpaw shifted a little beside him. "I know," he meowed back, "I figured it out when you came back and saw him by the warriors' den. There was no love there."

"Yes," Brinepaw agreed, "No love."

There was a moment of hush between them, the kind that only best friends are comfortable with. Brinepaw felt a profound amount of relief now that Fleetwater was gone. There was still some fear that he would have to wrestle with, he knew that. But at least he would sleep soundly tonight.

Burnetpaw spoke again, "I'm sorry for whatever you went through, Brinepaw. And I'm glad that it's over now."

"Me too."

"Get some rest. I'll see you in the morning."

Brinepaw fell asleep almost immediately. And when he did, he dreamt that he was a kitten again, nursing his mother's milk. It was sweet and warm and snuggly. And, best of all, his father was nowhere to be seen.

sixteen

Things calmed down following Brinepaw's return to camp. The next few days were extraordinarily normal, considering what had happened to Fleetwater. There had been a few sightings of WaveClan cats on TideClan territory, presumably sent by Adderstar to gather information. But they caused no trouble beyond that. Every time a WaveClan patrol was spotted trespassing, the TideClan cats would chase them off with no further conflict. Then the land would be quiet again until the next time WaveClan decided to cross the borderline.

Meanwhile, Almondstar continued to oversee Brinepaw's training and assured him repeatedly that she could see the benefit it was having on the progression of his powers. Brinepaw wasn't so sure. He felt no stronger, and he knew they were no closer to putting a stop to this inter-Clan war.

One day, the relative peace that the Clan had been experiencing was disrupted. Brinepaw was on patrol with Covestorm, Cedarfrost, and Bluepaw. He and Bluepaw trailed in the back while their mentors went on ahead. The hot sand stuck to Brinepaw's pads as he walked. He hung his head low to the ground, fatigued and frustrated.

Bluepaw glanced over tentatively at Brinepaw. "How are you?" the thin apprentice asked carefully.

Brinepaw was caught off-guard. He looked up, "What do you mean?"

Bluepaw was immediately annoyed. "You know what I mean," he retorted, "How are you dealing with everything? With Fleetwater?"

"Oh." Brinepaw gazed back at the ground and tucked his ears. He smiled a little, amused by Bluepaw's sharp response. It was nice to know that the apprentice was feeling more like his old self again. "I'm doing alright. Thanks for asking."

Bluepaw only grunted in reply and silence fell over them again. They walked several more paces that way, until Bluepaw spoke up once more, "It's not that I'm interested, or anything. Like, it's not that I care, you know."

"I know," Brinepaw chuckled. He couldn't believe he was having this conversation.

"I just thought it would be nice to ask."

"It was nice of you to ask. Thanks, Bluepaw."

Nothing more. Silence resumed. But inside his head, Brinepaw was rejoicing. Bluepaw seemed to finally be recovering from Rainflight's death. He'd even begun washing again, Brinepaw noticed. His coat held its healthy blue-gray sheen once more. For a while after Rainflight had passed, Bluepaw hadn't bothered to clean it and his fur had grown crusty and dirty. Brinepaw had watched the deterioration and had felt powerless to do anything about it. Bluepaw and him weren't friends, after all. They were much more like natural enemies. And what kind of cat would take advice from his enemy?

Not Bluepaw. He was far too stubborn and far too proud. But Brinepaw was beginning to like that about him. He respected his denmate's sense of self-worth. Part of him even aspired to replicate it in himself.

Ahead of them, Cedarfrost and Covestorm were murmuring in low voices. Bluepaw strained to hear what they were saying, but Brinepaw didn't feel inclined to care. He figured it was probably smalltalk or more discussion of the situation with WaveClan, and he wasn't interested in either.

At the very least, it was nice to get away from Almondstar for a little while. Brinepaw felt his frustration beginning to fade as he took in the sights. They were right alongside the ocean. The gulls looked especially happy in the good yellow sunlight of the day. Big white seashells dotted the beach and cast their spherical shadows onto the golden sand. To their right, the coastline sloped upwards to meet a grand bank of emerald grass.

Brinepaw had to keep reminding himself that Fleetwater was gone. Every time he slunk back to camp in the late night, he expected him there waiting to jump out at him. It seemed that Fawnpaw, however, couldn't get their father out of her head. She was still torn up over his death. She hadn't had the relationship Brinepaw had had with him. She'd seemed to like him quite a lot, actually. And maybe it was possible that Fleetwater had liked her, too. But Brinepaw couldn't be sure it was the truth, because he was tempted to believe that Fleetwater had cared about no one but himself.

Nonetheless, Fawnpaw knew nothing of Fleetwater's abuse towards her brother. Brinepaw did not intend to tell her, just as he did not intend to tell the rest of the Clan. Was it immoral to allow Fleetwater's memory to live on fondly in the mind of the Clan? Perhaps. But Brinepaw needed to protect his sister. She was breakable, like a shard of thin ice. And in times of war she was especially easy to stress out. It couldn't be easy being the medicine cat apprentice, now more than usual. There were plenty of lives at risk if she happened to lose focus.

And Fawnpaw acted this way. She was always on. Brinepaw couldn't have a normal conversation with her. She was affected by Fleetwater's suicide for many sunrises, until suddenly she stopped allowing herself to be affected. She shut down her thoughts and neutralized her feelings. Her capacity for empathy was seriously inhibited because she would not let herself feel.

It was disturbing for Brinepaw to see his normally so loving sister suddenly turn cold and emotionless. She was like an entirely different cat now. She would only speak when spoken to, and her typical sprightly personality had been reduced to the occasional spark of energy appearing in her sea green eyes.

Brinepaw was worried for her, but he worried more for himself these days. Almondstar was running him into the ground. He hadn't seen Ghost since that night underneath the Saltwater Elm. He was suspicious of WaveClan because they hadn't tried to kill him again. Things were just *too* quiet. Brinepaw's life hadn't been this uneventful since before he'd received his powers.

They passed a gathering of rabbit holes. Brinepaw peered down one

into the dusty darkness. It smelled of rabbit.

"Let's go, Brinepaw!" Covestorm called from up front.

Brinepaw's stomach growled. He lifted his head from the hole to look over at his mentor. "I'm hungry. Can't we stop to hunt?"

Covestorm's shoulders drooped in disappointment. Brinepaw could tell he wanted to continue on, but the great tom sighed and nodded his big head. "Very well," he agreed. Covestorm eyed the cluster of rabbit holes, "But you're not going to find anything in there. They're too far down, and they won't just jump out into your drooling mouth."

"Let's try the meadows," Cedarfrost boomed, blinking his large gray eyes.

Bluepaw followed the warriors as they made their way into the tall grass, but Brinepaw stayed put. When Bluepaw realized he wasn't going with them, he turned around and glared.

"You aren't going to catch any rabbits just standing there," muttered the blue-furred apprentice.

Brinepaw raised his plumed tail to silence him. "Just watch," he said.

He moved the tide with one long, sweeping motion of his left forepaw. The waterline travelled slowly up, slowly up, until there was water covering Brinepaw's feet and pouring into the rabbit holes.

"They may not come out if I stand here," meowed Brinepaw, "But they will come out if I flood their homes."

Cedarfrost and Covestorm were paused in the open field, watching with amazement as a line of rabbits came streaming from each of the burrows. Brinepaw picked them off one by one, slicing their necks cleanly with one sharp claw. Bluepaw hurried forward to help, and had killed three in a matter of seconds.

The surviving rabbits scattered throughout the field, evading

Cedarfrost and Covestorm, who stood completely stunned and planted firmly in place. The two warriors glanced at Brinepaw, then at each other, then sighed and went to join the apprentices.

Brinepaw pushed the tide back to its natural limit and dried up the rabbits' burrows. Between his work and Bluepaw's, there were eight brown carcasses lying on the beach.

The four cats stood in the midst of all the death. Covestorm was observing the area with a frown. Brinepaw waited expectantly for some form of praise or congratulations.

But all Covestorm did was shake his head and say, "It just seems rather unfair."

They ate three of the rabbits and buried the bones underneath the earth. The remaining five they carried back to camp. Brinepaw's good mood devolved back into the frustration he'd felt at the start of their patrol. Why was Covestorm being so cranky? Sure, it wasn't *conventional* hunting. But practically nothing he did now was conventional.

Brinepaw tossed his rabbit onto the pile and sat down to clean his ruffled fur. It was still gritty with sand, and every time he flattened it with his tongue it sprung back up and curled into the air. As he was working on getting the grains out from between his pads, Almondstar managed to sneak up beside him and sit down. Brinepaw scented her too late. His muscles flexed as he debated getting up and ignoring her altogether, but he knew that wouldn't end well. So he summoned the bravery to meet her cold cyan eyes.

"Good hunting, Brinepaw?" Almondstar asked in a mellow tone.

"Yes."

"Very good," mewed his leader approvingly. She twitched a creamy russet ear and fell silent to allow the rest of the patrol to deposit their prey onto the food pile. When it came Covestorm's turn to leave his rabbit on the pile, the dark tabby tom looked worried by what he saw. Brinepaw wondered if he might stay and try to join the conversation, but after a long pause Covestorm rounded and

stalked away.

It was getting dark. Brinepaw closed his eyes and felt a nighttime breeze on his pelt.

"He does not like me," said Almondstar, "And he does not approve of me talking to you."

Brinepaw didn't want to, but he reopened his eyes. Part of him wanted to leave and drift off to sleep, but as he glanced over at Almondstar, he could tell he was going to be there for a while. He tried his best to banish the sleepiness from his system and listen to what his leader was saying.

Almondstar shot Brinepaw a look that told him she knew that he was tired, but also that she did not care. "Do you know why he does not like me, Brinepaw?"

Her question was strangely impassive. She seemed to already know the answer, but was asking anyway. Brinepaw shrugged, "You two were involved at one time. Now you're not. It's as simple as that."

"Ah, you may be tempted to believe that. But things are rarely so simple. If that were the only grudge Covestorm held against me, he would have let it pass by now."

Aggravation pricked Brinepaw's skin. "You had kits with Adderstar. You also didn't choose him as deputy when he was the best candidate in the Clan. I think he has a lot of good reasons to be upset."

"I suppose. But there is even more to it." Almondstar was not offended in the slightest by Brinepaw's disrespect, though Brinepaw sort of wished she would be. If he could get her to walk away in anger, then he wouldn't have to be having this conversation anymore. But she stayed. Around them, the camp was suddenly washed in starlight. The moon was bright, too, and nearing its complete fullness. Brinepaw gazed up at it and remembered the last full moon and everything it had done to change his life.

"I'm not sure why you're talking to me about this," whispered

Brinepaw, and his words traveled out into the empty camp.

An owl hooted as it swooped overhead. Its tawny feathers were illuminated by the stars' silver glow.

"I may not be the best cat," said Almondstar, "And I may not be the best leader. But there is one thing StarClan has granted me, and that is the ability to read cats. I understand them better than they understand themselves. I know what makes them do certain things, and I know what keeps them from doing others. I can see into their hearts and their minds and I can access all of the feelings that they think they keep locked inside."

Brinepaw shifted uncomfortably. He felt very bare, as if Almondstar had stripped his fur away and was looking into him right now. Could she see his lungs inflating with air too spasmodically? Could she hear his heart beating too fast?

"And when I see Covestorm," Almondstar continued, "I see a cat with two parents and two brothers that he cares for deeply. I see a fearsome warrior with a rocky exterior and the skillset of a mountain lion. I see a tom dedicated to excellence and brilliance and caliber. But more than all of those things... I see you, Brinepaw."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Covestorm cares for nothing and nobody as deeply as he cares for you."

The world was slow and extremely sharp. Everywhere Brinepaw looked, he could distinguish every detail. The pawprints in the sand, the toothed edges of the trees' leaves, the patterns in the red boulders of the dens. Everything was profoundly defined against the blackness of the ever-deepening night.

Suddenly Brinepaw could take no more. He stood and padded away, not even looking back.

"Goodnight, Almondstar."

"Goodnight, Brinepaw."

At the back of the apprentices' den, Brinepaw could not sleep. Beside him, Burnetpaw was snoozing and murmuring softly. The other apprentices were asleep, too, but for some reason Brinepaw could not do the same. He grunted and got out of bed, trying not to rustle the moss as he left the den.

It was very cool now. Wind was coming off of the water and buffeting Brinepaw's coat. He squinted and tried to make out the shapes of the forest in the distance, but all he could see was the bright moonlight on the fields past camp.

So he walked out into the gray dappled expanse of grass, trusting that the forest was still on the other side. He went with a very specific goal in mind: to find Ghost.

There was nothing to suggest the idea that Ghost was in the forest, but Brinepaw felt as though he would be there anyway.

It was warmer away from the coast, where the wind had to travel large distances to reach him. The noise of the waves and the blowing air died down, and Brinepaw could hear himself think again. He listened to the *tap tap* of his paws and thought for a while about the incredible imbalance of life.

For the moons that he had been alive, Brinepaw's Clanmates had tried to teach him the concept of reciprocity. What you give is what you take. But in light of recent events, Brinepaw recognized this to be a complete lie. Life wasn't fair. It never had been. No matter how much good you put into the world, it is never guaranteed that you will receive good from the world. In this way, life is unpredictable. In this way, life is horribly, terribly unjust.

But that also makes it exciting, now doesn't it? Brinepaw reminded himself. He came upon outer edge of the forest and bounded into the trees.

With the canopy to shield the light from the moon and stars, it was much darker in the forest. Brinepaw felt completely concealed by the shadows, hidden away from all the badness that surely awaited

him.

In front of him was the splintered trunk of a tree. Brinepaw halted at its foot and stood in front of it. There was a flash of white as a transparent silhouette materialized on top and then immediately disappeared.

Brinepaw gasped, "Ghost?"

His voice echoed into the space around him. Then Ghost reappeared on the stump. He looked down on Brinepaw with a smile, "You called?"

Ghost's see-through eyes were soft. Brinepaw met them with a similar affection, "Ghost," he greeted, "It's good to see you again."

"It has been some time."

"I've learned a lot since I last saw you."

"Oh, really?" Ghost queried. He looked interested.

Brinepaw nodded and sat down, tucking his tail in front of his legs. "I think I know who you are," he said plainly.

Ghost blinked in shock but said nothing.

"I think you're... me," Brinepaw explained, "I think you're the ghost of my own life. I mean, it makes sense. You aren't a StarClan warrior yet. You're trapped here, scrambling to tell me something that even you don't remember. And you have powers. *Magnificent* powers. The power to heal and the power to control the sea."

Ghost was relatively unaffected. He remained calm and thought for a moment. Then he said, "You might be right, Brinepaw. I do see a lot of myself in you. But it still doesn't explain why I'm here."

"None of this is recovering your memories?"

Ghost shook his head solemnly, "I'm sorry, but no."

Brinepaw sighed, "Very well." He leapt up to join Ghost on the

stump. He settled in beside the tom, his side phasing right through Ghost's translucent shoulder.

"Well," breathed Ghost, "Here we are."

"Here we are," Brinepaw repeated.

Together they watched the figures of small animals stir in the brush, the shapes of birds flit from branch to branch, and the space surrounding them sink deeper into shadow.

Something occurred to Brinepaw as he was taking in the eerie stillness of the night. "Ghost," he said, "I met another version of myself a while ago."

Ghost looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I met another Brinepaw. But he wasn't you and he wasn't me. I mean, he looked like me in the way that he looked real. He had big bronze eyes and wispy brown fur. And around us there was smoke and fire and a fierce rainstorm."

"Interesting..."

"Yes."

"Fire?"

"Yes."

"How peculiar."

And that really was the word for it. Peculiar. Everything that was going on was just so peculiar. No interpretation of the events that had transpired seemed adequate to Brinepaw. He would just have to go on not knowing.

They listened to the sounds of the forest for some time. Brinepaw's eyelids were growing droopy. He barely noticed when Ghost's image started to fade.

And Brinepaw was half asleep when Ghost murmured, "Impending

doom," and then vanished entirely.

seventeen

Something was extremely wrong. As Brinepaw had made his way back to camp that night, he could feel the world holding its breath. It was as if an energy that had been brewing for a long time was about to finally be released. It made the young apprentice uneasy. He knew with an unsettling certainty that all his visions were about to come to fruition.

The following days were agonizing. Brinepaw continuously felt as if he were about to dive over the edge of that cliff. The anxiety could not be shaken from his system. A cold stone of dread sat in his stomach and refused to budge. He tried to go about his life as normal, but it was clear to every cat he interacted with that he was not okay. His eyes were always wide and his mannerisms were always skittish. On multiple occasions, Sagecloud had approached to ask how he was doing, but Brinepaw had disregarded her every time.

He was impatient. He was irritable. He was not very fun to train with. Almondstar grew frustrated with him, but Brinepaw did not care. He grew very detached from her, and even further detached from her expectations. He was not interested in preparing for the war.

On the day of the full moon, Brinepaw went begrudgingly with his leader to the waterside. Covestorm came along, too, though Almondstar very much disliked his being there. Together, the three cats lined up at the ocean's edge, their paws dipped in the lapping waves.

The sunrise that morning was beautiful, but Brinepaw could not bring himself to enjoy it. It too drastically contrasted the whirling anticipation he felt inside. The calm waters and gentle wispy clouds existed in direct opposition to his emotions. Brinepaw could not understand how everything could appear so perfect while he was certain there was incomprehensible disaster looming overhead.

"As I'm sure you're already aware, the full moon gathering is tonight."

Brinepaw tried to tear his attention away from the horizon to look at Almondstar.

She was staring directly at him, her stance planted firmly in the water-covered sand. Covestorm was behind, sitting just out of the water and watching the TideClan leader with careful eyes.

"We need to be prepared for anything to happen at this meeting," said Almondstar, "You must be ready to fight."

"With all due respect, Almondstar, I seriously doubt WaveClan would disrespect the truce like that."

Almondstar looked angry, but Brinepaw didn't regret speaking up. Making Almondstar upset was the least of his concerns at the moment. He kept a level gaze and awaited her response.

"You don't know Adderstar like I do!" she spat, "He's a vile, power-hungry cat, too ambitious for his own good. I won't allow my Clan to be caught off-guard simply because we're relying on WaveClan to obey the truce."

Brinepaw shrugged, "Well, what do you suggest we do, then?"

Almondstar gave a side smile, like she was pleased to hear Brinepaw's question. "I propose we bring a war force to the gathering. They wouldn't all be visible, of course, but we should bring some extra warriors in addition to the cats attending and have them hide in the bushes."

"What bushes?" Brinepaw cocked his head, "The gathering place is an open field."

His leader lashed her russet and amber tail. "You're right," she growled, "Where will they take cover?"

Covestorm spoke up from behind, "Just another reason to abandon this ridiculous plan and just treat the night like normal. You have no evidence to suggest WaveClan is plotting an attack."

Almondstar whirled around and snarled at him, "Stay out of this, Covestorm! If I wanted your opinion, I would have asked for it."

"Rather than trusting my opinion, you're discussing this matter with my apprentice?"

"Your apprentice also happens to be the most powerful cat in the world."

Covestorm narrowed his eyes to slits of sharp orange, "While that may be true, he still has a lot to learn in the way of proper judgement."

"Whatever, Covestorm," said Almondstar, "I don't need your approval. I've already discussed this with your brother, and he thinks it's a fine plan."

"Heronstrike wouldn't say that. He knows better."

A whispering wind blew across the shore. Brinepaw watched as it ruffled his mentor's long fur. Covestorm was icy and composed, as usual. The mention of Heronstrike hadn't seemed to fluster him in the way Brinepaw was sure Almondstar had wanted. Perhaps the great warrior had truly come to terms with his brother's successes and wasn't bothered that he held the deputy's title.

Almondstar grunted in frustration and turned away. "Show me your skills, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw was happy to do so. They talked too much of war. But there would be no war. Whatever this deadness was, this *feeling* that he could sense in the air, it was not an indicator of war.

Brinepaw lifted a forepaw and pulled a stream of saltwater out of the ocean. He swirled it precisely, allowing it to travel a calculated path. He controlled its every movement, dictated its every turn. He moved and shaped it at will, staring intensely as the water's image reflected in his irises and shimmered in the gleaming sunlight.

"Incredible," breathed Almondstar, "Your abilities are just incredible. I have no doubt that we will be well protected at this gathering tonight. StarClan has given you this gift for a reason,

Brinepaw. You are a guardian of the Clan now."

They returned to camp, their legs slick with wet. Brinepaw grabbed a large bird from the food pile upon arrival and dragged it over to the shade of a tree. There he munched on his meal, allowing its juicy flesh to fill his belly and warm him. Whatever it may be that was coming, he would need his strength to face it.

He could see that Burnetpaw was only now emerging from the apprentice's den. The small, red and white tom spotted Brinepaw under the tree and trotted over. Unsurprisingly, he wore a huge grin plastered across his face. "Can I share your food?" he asked politely.

Brinepaw pushed the bird carcass towards his friend. Burnetpaw took a few hungry gulps, then pushed it back. "So, what're you going to do before the gathering?"

"Nothing."

Burnetpaw's eyes widened, *"Nothing?* That's a horrible answer."

"What do you *want* me to say?"

"For StarClan's sake, I don't know. You could say, 'I'm going exploring!' or 'I'm going to hunt some prey!' or 'I wonder what the forest looks like from the other side!' There's so much to do, Brinepaw! How could you possibly say that you're going to do nothing?"

Brinepaw sighed, "I've done a lot these past few days, Burnetpaw. I'm not like you. I need a break every now and again."

In truth, Brinepaw was worried that if he left camp, something catastrophic would happen. Almondstar had been right about one thing: he was TideClan's guardian. And he intended to protect his home.

Burnetpaw kicked the dirt, "Fine. You can stay here and be lazy if you want to."

"Thank you for your permission," Brinepaw replied sarcastically.

"Or... you could come with me to one of my favorite places!"

"I'll pass, but thank you for the invitation."

Burnetpaw rose to his feet and pushed Brinepaw with his head. "Okay, the invitation has just turned into a demand! You're coming with me."

"Okay, okay," grumbled Brinepaw, feeling an ache in his side as his friend plowed his skull against it.

Brinepaw felt conflicted as they left camp. He looked back to see Fogspirit coming out of the nursery, carrying Minnowkit by the scruff. Milkpaw and Bunnypaw were huddled by the apprentices' den, and Covestorm's parents, Cliffleap and Jayberry, were sharing tongues. The day had begun, and he wasn't there to share in it. More distressingly, however, was the fact that he wasn't there to prevent anything bad from happening.

But they would be fine, Brinepaw told himself. His Clanmates knew how to take care of themselves.

It was funny, how quickly his mindset had changed. Just one moon ago, Brinepaw had felt very little attachment to his Clan. He'd been convinced that his birth had been a mistake, and that he didn't belong in TideClan. But just as Ghost had promised he would, Brinepaw had come to learn that he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

They hugged the sea as they wandered out of camp, leaving pawprints in the sand behind them. Burnetpaw never strayed from the beach; it was clear he had a very specific destination in mind. But he was in no rush. His footsteps were slow and rhythmic.

"Where are we going?" Brinepaw called from behind.

Burnetpaw glanced back to flash him an eager smile, "You'll see."

Brinepaw paused and lowered his head. He was shaking. For a moment he didn't think he'd be able to get himself moving again, but he took a deep inhale of ocean breeze and forced himself to press on after his friend. They moved gradually, methodically

through the territory. No words passed between them. Brinepaw could focus on nothing but the unpleasant feeling inside of him. He'd been uncomfortable his whole life. He'd been sad and he'd been lonely and he'd been scared, but it had felt nothing like this did now.

This was something entirely different. It extended beyond himself, to the entire rest of creation. There was something fundamentally wrong with life today. An indescribable imbalance of energies.

Soon they came to the delta that ran from the border stream into the ocean. Without hesitation, Burnetpaw hopped the streamlets of the delta and ended up on the other side. Brinepaw remained on the TideClan side, refusing to believe what he had just witnessed.

"Are you crazy?" shouted Brinepaw, "You're trespassing on WaveClan land!"

"Just come with me!" Burnetpaw yelled back, "It'll be okay! I promise!"

"Tell me where we're going first!"

"We're going to my birthplace!"

The wind whistled through Brinepaw's ears. Some invisible force tugged at his paws. A chill ran through his body as he crossed involuntarily to the other side.

Now on WaveClan's beach, the two apprentices travelled onward. Brinepaw gritted his teeth and tried to tell himself that he was in control, but at this point he felt irreversibly driven by the desire to know the truth. What was going on here?

It wasn't long before something appeared in the distance, straight ahead of them. Brinepaw knew in an instant that's where they were headed. It was a very tall mountain with jagged black edges. Its figure was enormous and magisterial, for it seemed to command all that was beneath it. Brinepaw had never seen it before in his life. He hadn't even known it existed until now.

"What is that place?"

Burnetpaw didn't look back this time. "WaveClan calls it the Peak of Black Sand."

Brinepaw swallowed as they continued to approach the ominous mountain. It was nearly midday now; their journey thus far had taken the entire morning. "H-Hey, Burnetpaw, shouldn't we turn back now if we want to make it in time for the gathering?"

"We'll make it back with plenty of time to spare. Trust me."

It grew closer and closer and larger and larger until at last they stood at its foot. Brinepaw craned his neck to stare up at its regal, jet black peak. There was something floating over the crown of the dark mountain. It was gray and cloud-like.

Smoke.

Immediately Burnetpaw began to climb the steep side of the mountain. Brinepaw leapt forward and clamped his jaws onto Burnetpaw's hind leg. Burnetpaw kicked him off and whirled around, "What are you doing?" he asked his friend, flabbergasted.

"Look at the top!" cried Brinepaw, "You can't go up there! Burnetpaw, this mountain isn't just a mountain. It's a *volcano*."

Burnetpaw looked confused. "I know."

"Then why are you climbing it?" Brinepaw questioned desperately. Had his friend gone insane?

Burnetpaw sighed and stepped down to Brinepaw's level. He looked him right in the eye. "Brinepaw, there are things you don't know about me that I should have told you a long time ago. I am giving you the opportunity to learn them now. Do you accept, or do you decline?"

Brinepaw just stood there, stunned into silence.

"If you accept, you will follow me to the top. If you wish to remain here, that is fine too."

Burnetpaw started to climb again. Loose rocks trickled down the

mountain's edge as his paws scrabbled up its uneven surface. Brinepaw watched his friend's russet body get smaller and smaller as he went further up. The top was smoking more fiercely now and the sky above was clogged with gray.

Brinepaw was sure that the answers could be found at the top of the volcano, but he kept his feet planted to the ground for as long as he could. He fought the urge to chase after Burnetpaw for quite some time, long enough for Burnetpaw to go completely out of sight.

And there he was, just a single being in the midst of all this danger. Everything that he was feeling was so bizarre and so complex that Brinepaw did not even try to understand it all. He observed each of his emotions like a branch floating in a flowing river. Appearing. Passing. Disappearing.

And finally he knew that there was no point in resisting the urge any longer. He would summit the volcano. It was only a matter of when. So Brinepaw stopped prolonging the inevitable and took a decisive step onto the gravely slope.

Soon the ocean beneath him was very far away, and the wind had grown into a monstrous howl. Brinepaw had to fight to stay standing on his feet. He took a peek at the realm below, and his breath caught in his throat at the sight of how high he was above the world. TideClan camp was not visible from here, but he could see the faraway river delta. He could see the long golden beaches and patches of dark green where forests stood proudly. There were huge, puffy clouds floating dreamily over the roaring water of the sea. Everything appeared so deliberate and perfectly woven into the fabric of the universe.

Brinepaw felt the overwhelming sense of profound meaning. Whatever happened next was bound to be significant. He took this information with a heavy heart and continued up the volcano.

Burnetpaw was visible as a small red speck ahead of him. There was still quite some distance between Brinepaw and the summit. The terrain grew more and more unforgiving the further up he went, and soon the going was so slow that Brinepaw was uncertain he would reach the top by nightfall.

He cleared a large crag and landed with a *thump* on the other side. There, he shook out his fur and took a moment to stand still, gasping to catch his breath in the high altitude.

Brinepaw looked up. He was gaining on Burnetpaw.

There was an eerie silence except for the wind. Brinepaw became trapped in his mind and stopped collecting information about his external environment. His legs worked autonomously as his thoughts drifted away from the physical and towards the spiritual. Without him realizing, time marched on and the sun was suddenly very low in the sky. Breathtaking strokes of red and orange lit the horizon on fire. Hot and cold came together on the line dividing sky from wave.

But the TideClan apprentice was only awakened from his trance when at last he'd reached the volcano's peak. When Brinepaw became aware again, he was shocked to find what could only be described as a bowl of fire in front of him.

The land fell off into a hollow that was filled with bright, bubbling lava. Brinepaw glanced over at Burnetpaw, who was standing a few tail-lengths away.

Burnetpaw's hazel eyes glowed. He was staring into the pit with longing. "This is where I was born."

Brinepaw tipped his head to one side, watching the lava roll and gurgle far below. "What do you mean?" Though he did not mean it to, his voice shook.

Burnetpaw shifted to look at Brinepaw and Brinepaw noticed for the first time that his friend's russet pelt resembled the color of fire. The mixed hues of his fur were like a muted version of the lava pool beneath them. His eyes were sharp and full of vitality.

He was a part of this place, and it was a part of him.

Brinepaw could feel himself on the verge of understanding. He took in a deep breath of smoke and stared for a long time. Burnetpaw turned around again to face the simmering pool. His small figure

became a dark silhouette against the unbeatable brightness of the lava.

"I am the spirit of this volcano."

eighteen

The wind whistled in Brinepaw's ears as he stared at his friend. Burnetpaw was standing precariously close to the edge of the fiery bowl and the wind threatened to knock him into the boiling hot lava. Brinepaw gasped and staggered forward. The space in front of his eyes was distorted by intense, wavering heat. Burnetpaw's image was wobbly and blurred.

"What do you mean?" sputtered Brinepaw desperately.

Burnetpaw turned his head to look over his shoulder. He smiled at Brinepaw. "I mean exactly what I said. I am the spirit of this volcano. I was born here about nine moons ago."

Brinepaw approached him carefully. "I'm not sure I understand."

He stopped after a few steps. There was so much pressure inside his head. Brinepaw shut his eyes tight and whined, dropping low to the ground. He felt suddenly very sick to his stomach. But after a few moments of crouching, the feeling passed. Brinepaw opened his eyes to see Burnetpaw looking at him with concern.

"I'm fine," Brinepaw assured him. But the pressure was already returning. His ears collapsed involuntarily onto his head as the pain intensified, and Brinepaw winced.

"You don't look fine," said Burnetpaw.

"Seriously, I'm okay," the TideClan apprentice insisted, ignoring the throbbing headache he felt as he forced himself to go and sit beside his friend. "What were you saying about this volcano? If you were born here, how did you end up in TideClan?"

Burnetpaw didn't answer for a while. He was too busy observing Brinepaw's behavior and body language. Brinepaw could tell he was still worried. But finally, Burnetpaw shrugged and replied calmly, "I don't understand it completely, to be honest. All I remember is

emerging from the lava and traveling by air to TideClan territory. And I also remember landing on the ground and realizing that I had a body." Burnetpaw's expression lit up as he spoke, and Brinepaw could hear the excitement rising in his voice as he relived his first moments as a sentient being.

Brinepaw was thoroughly confused. "You didn't have a body before?"

"Of course not," Burnetpaw mewed, eyes ablaze with the reflection of flickering embers, "I didn't even exist before. Well, that's not entirely true, I guess. I existed before I had a body, but not in the way that I do now. I had no awareness, no thought processes, and no identity of my own."

"Identity..." Brinepaw echoed, trying to understand. "What is your identity now?" He did his best to ignore the pounding sensation behind his eyes.

"I'm Burnetpaw now. A true TideClan apprentice. Everything has changed since I left the volcano. I got the chance to see the world and transport myself from place to place in a healthy, beautiful vessel. I'm not sure how I ended up so lucky, to leave this place behind. Maybe StarClan is on my side."

Nothing seemed real. Brinepaw felt as if he were watching a dreamscape, a delusion of the mind that he had created for himself. But at the same time, he knew that everything he was seeing was the truth. Everything had been building to this. But why? What was the point of all this?

The ground underneath their feet shook. Brinepaw set a wide stance and braced himself, just barely avoiding toppling over into the fire pit. Burnetpaw, however, remained completely calm. He continued to stare with unsettling interest at the bubbling lava below.

The rocky floor shook again. Brinepaw cried out in agony as his legs spasmed and buckled. He fell onto his belly and groaned.

What is happening?!

Burnetpaw was still unfazed. "When I gained consciousness, it was like this enormous wave of happiness had just exploded onto me. I realized that I'd been trapped for a very long time. I was finally able to experience things the way the Clan cats have been experiencing things for many, many moons. I could see color and shapes and shadows and all these things that were brand new to me. It was almost like coming out of a deep hibernation.

"The life of a spirit was chosen for me by some greater force. I didn't want to be chained to this volcano. I didn't ask for it. I suppose it was just my destiny. My place in the universe..." Burnetpaw trailed off for just a brief moment.

Then he raised his voice with more conviction and shouted into the orange, boiling waves, "But why should *I* be the one to hold the life of the volcano? What did I do to deserve such a treacherous fate? Why do I have to miss out on all the fun? I hadn't even known that I hadn't lived until I broke free and felt what being alive means! I was so ignorant... so unbelievably ignorant to everything that I wasn't a part of."

Brinepaw gasped as the earth rumbled yet again. He glanced backwards and saw what was truly the most terrifying sight he'd ever laid his eyes upon: the entire *world* was shaking. Everything beneath him, far below the watchful peak of the volcano, was vibrating with incomprehensible strength and intensity. The forests, the fields, even the vast expanse of the ocean... everything was outlined by a peculiar colorful film and trembling with fear.

"Burnetpaw!" Brinepaw exclaimed, "We have to get out of here! I think the volcano is going to blow!"

But his friend wasn't listening. He wore a wild, euphoric grin. "You can't have me!" he shouted at the roaring volcano, "I belong here now, with Brinepaw and all my friends!"

The volcano growled and sputtered angrily. The two apprentices were knocked back as a splash of lava leapt from the confines of the bowl.

Burnetpaw stamped his paws in defiance. "No! You can't have me!"

Brinepaw was speechless. His friend's pelt looked alive, whipped up by the passing wind. His hazel eyes had turned red with fire. His anger and terror had morphed him into someone totally unrecognizable.

"You can't!" Burnetpaw screamed at the volcano, "I won't go back! I don't want to!"

Brinepaw shook his head violently, praying to StarClan that he would awake from a terrible nightmare. But it did not happen. Instead, he stood frozen as the full moon rose in the big black sky. It was so bright and huge, its pure milky light preventing the surrounding stars from being visible. Brinepaw felt so very alone.

It was a gorgeous scene: Burnetpaw's thin frame backed by the white face of the shining moon, flaming orange lava rising in the bowl. Brinepaw's jaws parted in awe.

You have to push him in. It's the only way.

Brinepaw gulped as the words returned to him. He remembered back to when he'd encountered the other Brinepaw on the beach. He looked up and squinted into the bright light of the glowing lava. Burnetpaw was at the very edge. It would be so easy.

The world had been thrown out of balance.

And now, the fate of all existence rested on Brinepaw's shoulders.

He carried the weight of this knowledge as he lurched forward. Burnetpaw turned around. His eyes grew wider than Brinepaw had ever seen them.

"No..." Burnetpaw whimpered, shrinking into a ball. He backed away from Brinepaw and slipped, rear legs dangling over the hungry fire.

Brinepaw bared his teeth, growling.

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But

soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

Burnetpaw looked so innocent and scared. Then he nodded quickly and scrambled away from the edge. Brinepaw watched despondently as Burnetpaw disappeared down the far side of the volcano.

Brinepaw breathed in the sweltering air. The lava pool gurgled and burped. Brinepaw fled down the way he'd come up. He cut his paws on the sharp, rocky slopes of the mountainside. His pads became bloody and scraped. He tumbled more than he ran, losing his footing on several occasions, too afraid to be careful.

Just as he reached the base of the volcano, Brinepaw heard a dreadful explosion. He turned to see a huge surge of fire and lava spewing from the volcano's peak. Magma seeped out the top and

down the sides, moving with alarming speed towards the ground. Brinepaw's heart dropped.

He raced across the land, over roots and branches and all the way to the beach. He jumped the river delta and arrived back in TideClan territory. He did not pause for a moment to catch his breath. He went with purpose. He had to warn the Clan. Meanwhile, the full moon was still rising into the center of the night sky.

When he was close to camp, Brinepaw glanced over his shoulder at the erupting volcano. It was a dark and foreboding presence in the far distance, covered with glowing magma veins, topped with spouting fire, and swathed in plumes of smoke. Brinepaw focused back on where he was going, too frightened to keep looking.

Every hair of his pelt was raised, sprung into the air like the quills of a porcupine. Finally the camp appeared in front of him, and Brinepaw could see a group of cats assembled at its center. *They must be preparing to leave for the gathering.*

"Stop!" Brinepaw cried, bursting into the circle of warriors.

"Brinepaw!" Covestorm stepped forward, "What is it?"

Brinepaw bowed his head, panting. "The volcano on WaveClan territory has erupted," he breathed, "We have to leave."

Bunnypaw pushed her way to the front of the crowd, "But what about the gathering?" she squeaked.

"Forget the gathering!" Brinepaw thrust his muzzle in her face, "If we don't get out of here *now*, everyone will die."

There was a distant booming. The congregation of TideClan cats all turned collectively to face the source of the menacing sound. Even in the darkness, the volcano could be seen on the far horizon, glowing ominously. Brinepaw's jaw dropped as his eyes trailed down to the foot of the volcano, where the land became engulfed in flame.

He jumped in front of his Clanmates. "Don't you see? The eruption

has caused a fire! It's only a matter of time until it reaches our camp."

Uneasy murmurs spread throughout the group. Brinepaw found Bluepaw's face in the crowd. The normally pompous tom appeared small and timid now, cowering to the ground and hiding his face with his paws. Brinepaw's gaze flickered to Almondstar and Heronstrike. Both leader and deputy looked fearful. Covestorm, however, still managed to keep his usual composure.

"We should get everyone to the beach," mewed the senior warrior, "If the fire reaches us, we can wade into the sea. We'll be safe in the water."

Brinepaw nodded. Covestorm rose with determination and addressed the surrounding warriors, "Get everyone out of their dens. We'll walk together to the beach."

Cats took off in every direction, leaving to notify their friends and family of the oncoming disaster.

Covestorm sighed and blinked at his apprentice, "What were you doing at the volcano, Brinepaw?"

Brinepaw narrowed his eyes and deflected the question, "I'll explain later. Right now we have to focus on getting the Clan to safety."

It was clear Covestorm wanted to know more, but he nodded reluctantly and hurried away to the elder's den. He emerged a few seconds later with Cliffleap and Jayberry at either side.

Brinepaw redirected his focus to what was happening at the volcano. To his dismay, the fire had already spread to become at least three times its original size. From this great distance, it looked like an orange lake, fed by the streams of magma that drained from the volcano's top. Suddenly the fire had tripled in size again. Brinepaw felt as though the breath had been knocked from his lungs. Panic twisted in his chest and throat. "Hurry!" he called to his Clanmates, who were still rushing about, "We have to leave now!"

Suddenly there was no clean air to breathe. Brinepaw looked up

and saw that all of the stars had been blotted out by a blanket of solemn gray. Slate-colored flakes were falling from the sky.

Ash.

Brinepaw shook his head to clear his thoughts. Then something occurred to him. He watched the edge of the distant fire as it crept further and further into darkness, illuminating all that it touched. WaveClan camp was only a short distance from the volcano.

All of TideClan now stood in the center of camp. Brinepaw's heart ached at the sight of the Clan's four tiny kittens trembling in their fur as they stood by their mothers. The ash continued to fall all around them, coming down so fast that it was beginning to form piles at their feet. Brinepaw's blood ran icy cold. He faced Covestorm, who was staring at him expectantly, "Make sure everybody gets to the beach. I'm going to help WaveClan."

Covestorm's eyes flashed, "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"The lava has probably already reached them," Covestorm pointed out grimly.

"I know," Brinepaw said, "But I have to try."

Although Covestorm's expression was pained, Brinepaw could tell he understood.

Without another word, Brinepaw cast a sad glance at his mentor and and ran for the fire. He felt his powers building underneath the floating moon, strength pouring into his legs from the open sky. He was running with more speed than he'd ever felt in his short life, head still pounding, tail flying behind him with every stride. It didn't take long to get to the border stream, and just beyond that was the wall of fast-spreading fire.

Brinepaw skidded to a halt. He tried to peer through the flames to the other side, but there was no other side to peer through to. Everything was utterly blackened and destroyed, demolished by the unforgiving flames. He yelped and backed away as the heat of the

fire touched his face.

Suddenly, from the depths of the inferno, something new appeared. Viscous magma poured across the ground. Brinepaw turned away and leapt back across the stream to TideClan territory, but the magma followed. The hot, thick liquid traveled over the creek with alarming ease. Brinepaw gaped, mind racing fast.

Everything rippled in the heat. Nothing appeared to have its regular shape. Brinepaw could feel himself slipping into the stress of the event. But he pushed the temptation to panic away and forced himself to think.

What now?

WaveClan was dead. There was no way they'd survived the quick spread of the fire and magma. Sorrow washed all through Brinepaw, but he couldn't allow himself the time to grieve. He had to do something to stop his Clan from suffering the same terrible fate.

But then Whitefin's sharp blue gaze appeared in his mind. Then he saw Plumpaw's cheerful smile and Adderstar's steadfast expression. Brinepaw recoiled from the flames that licked his paws. They were all gone...

It couldn't be happening. Everything had been leading up to this and yet, it couldn't possibly be here already. *I'm not ready,* Brinepaw thought despairingly, *I'm just not ready. I don't know what to do!*

He raised his snout to the air, "Ghost!" he cried hopelessly, "Ghost! Please help me!"

But nobody came. Brinepaw wept into his forepaws as the fire took away everything in its path. The brook was nothing but a pit of magma now. The grass and the flowers were no more. Everything was swallowed and suffocated in ash.

"Ghost..." Brinepaw pleaded with nobody, "Ghost, I can't do it on my own."

No answer. There were no voices in this terrain of extinction.

As he shook against the singed grass, encircled by flames, Brinepaw wondered where Burnetpaw was now.

nineteen

And so Brinepaw stood in a ring of fire, desperately considering his options. He stopped crying for help and straightened up. The gaze of the forlorn apprentice was drawn inexplicably to the sky. More specifically, to the moon. Its heavenly light broke through the shroud of smoke and fell upon Brinepaw's face.

He reveled in the feeling of the midnight wash on his fur. Brinepaw closed his eyes and allowed himself to just feel.

Even though it was so hot, the moon chilled him to the bone. Brinepaw shivered as his eyes shot open. There was the flickering orange fire in front of him. There was the glowing volcano penetrating the dark of the night. The picture of destruction.

Brinepaw felt suddenly fearless with the moon watching over him. He breathed in pure, crystal serenity, and with his exhale he pulled water from the air. With deep focus, Brinepaw brought the water into a sweeping stream which he used to extinguish the surrounding flames. When his path was clear, Brinepaw hopped away from the approaching lava and hurried to the beach. His Clan needed him.

The full moon beat on with Brinepaw's heart, lending him strength. And although he could not see the stars, Brinepaw felt that StarClan was there too. He imagined Rainflight viewing him from above, wishing for the safety of the Clan. *I won't let you down.*

Brinepaw sprung onto the sand and sent it spewing across the beach. The fire had already swallowed up much of the land, leaving dead blackness in its wake. The beach, too, was under assault from the merciless flames. Brinepaw saw the dark shapes of his Clanmates up ahead. They seemed to have arrived safely, but the area around them was all ablaze.

So he dodged to left and right as the flames jumped at him.

Soon he came upon an impassable wall of fire, so he pulled the tide of the ocean forward and took a path through the water.

Finally he stood on the outskirts of where the TideClan cats were gathered. The majority of them had waded into the sea and now stood huddled together, shaking in the briny water. But three cats still stood on the wet sand: Almondstar, Heronstrike, and Covestorm.

"Brinepaw!" exclaimed Covestorm as Brinepaw approached.

"I couldn't even get onto WaveClan territory," Brinepaw reported.

Covestorm nodded. This was unsurprising news. Brinepaw knew that as far as his mentor was concerned, WaveClan had been dead since the volcano first erupted.

The earth trembled and shook. Both Covestorm and Brinepaw raised their heads to watch as more lava spewed from the distant volcano. Plumes of smoke and ash gathered overhead and as the ash fell, it accumulated on the water turned the ocean gray.

Almondstar jerked her head between them, "Where is Burnetpaw?"

Brinepaw lowered his head and said nothing.

"Brinepaw, I need to know. What happened to my apprentice?"

Brinepaw ignored her for a moment, turning to douse some of the nearby fire with a well-placed wave. Then he turned back to his leader and sighed, "I'm not sure," he admitted, "He went down the other side of the volcano and I haven't seen him since."

The apprenticed peered past Almondstar's distraught expression to the disturbing image of nearing lava. Covestorm followed his apprentice's eyes and raised his tail in alarm.

Heronstrike and Almondstar turned to see the lava creeping in and covering the beach. Together, all four cats backed away into

the ocean. The water lapped at their chest fur and slammed the shoreline, intensified by the fullness of the watchful moon. Protected by the water, Brinepaw felt he could resume talking.

"We're just going to have to trust that Burnetpaw is okay. He can take care of himself."

Brinepaw believed what said. As long as Brinepaw had known him, Burnetpaw's spunky personality had served him well. It granted the young tom a sense of bravado, which he carried with him through any situation. Burnetpaw had always been outgoing, eager, and startlingly brave. Brinepaw had wondered where it all came from. How could an orphaned kitten grow up to become so confident?

It all made sense now. Burnetpaw was a spirit. And the spirit of a volcano, nonetheless. What did a volcano have to fear?

As it turned out, it seemed that the only thing Burnetpaw was actually afraid of was the volcano itself. The prospect of going back to where he came from. Brinepaw recalled how his friend had run from him. He pictured the flash of betrayal he'd seen in those mixed hazel eyes.

Heronstrike was the next to speak up. "So, now what?" pondered the great warrior, "Are we just going to sit here until the volcano decides it's finished throwing its tantrum?"

The others chuckled a little bit at Heronstrike's wording, but Brinepaw recognized the truth behind the way Heronstrike had phrased it. The volcano *was* throwing a tantrum. It had lost something long ago, or rather some*one*. And now it wanted that someone back. But, Brinepaw realized, he had let that someone go. Had he really ruined his only chance at restoring balance to the world?

As usual, he was so terribly confused. Right down to the end, Brinepaw was confused. He never felt sure of anything, and this was an especially muddled case. What exactly was he expected to do? Murder his best friend in the name of saving the world?

The cruelty of his position was truly unfathomable. Brinepaw hoped there was something more to it. There was just so little substance to the problem he was meant to confront. How could he make a logical decision when so little of what was happening was actually based upon logic?

"Yes," Brinepaw said at last, "That's exactly what we're going to do. We need to wait this out. Nature is settling."

Covestorm considered the ambiguity of this statement. "What do you mean by that, Brinepaw?" he questioned.

"Don't you see? Everything weird we've been experiencing has been leading up to this. The war, my powers, Fleetwater's death... it's all the just groundwork for something bigger."

Heronstrike narrowed his eyes impatiently, "You're going to have to explain better than that, young one."

But Brinepaw wasn't convinced he *could* explain it in a way that would make sense to the others. As he fought for the right words, there was another low rumble and then a hiss as the lava reached the water and began to cool. The viscous liquid solidified on the shoreline, transforming into jagged black rock.

Everything dimmed in comparison to the brilliance of the fire and lava. Brinepaw fell into a trance as he observed the ruin that lay before him. Beyond the bleak, gray water was the beach. Only it wasn't the beach anymore. Every tail-length was covered in dancing flame. Every tree in the forest was burning. Even TideClan camp was completely flooded with lava.

The colors green and blue seemed to have been erased from existence. There was nothing to suggest that life inhabited the land in front of them. Brinepaw couldn't draw in even a single breath. His home was a wasteland.

"Brinepaw," Covestorm murmured.

Brinepaw walked slowly away from them, heading straight for the beach of flames.

"Brinepaw!" called Covestorm.

But Brinepaw wasn't listening. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. As the lava cooled into igneous rock, it provided a platform for more lava to travel towards the ocean. Then, that lava would reach the water and cool and the cycle would repeat.

The lava was building a new shoreline.

Pretty soon, the volcanic shoreline would reach the TideClan cats and bring the lava and fire upon them.

Brinepaw raised his paws out of the salty water and pushed huge waves onto the lava. But no matter how quickly he worked, the lava just kept coming. Soon he was backing away again, driven back by the encroaching shoreline. Brinepaw could hear the panic of his Clanmates rising behind him as they looked on.

The fire was spreading towards them. Brinepaw narrowed his eyes and brought forth a wall of water. He glanced back at Covestorm. The big tabby was watching the flames with haunting acceptance. He made no effort to run, nor to protect the others. He simply cast a very long, sad look at Brinepaw and then shut his eyes tight.

On Covestorm's eyelids Brinepaw saw all of his failures play out in front of him. He saw the laziness he'd possessed in the early moons of his training. He saw the siege on TideClan camp. He saw the decimation of WaveClan.

Brinepaw turned away from Covestorm and howled into the flames. He snarled and swirled his tail, feeling a surge of power coarse through his veins. Above him, clouds began to appear and spiral around where he stood in the sea. They grew in size and shape until the entire sky was covered in one enormous storm cloud. Brinepaw grunted with the effort as he filled the clouds with more and more moisture.

Now there was a heaviness in the air. Brinepaw could feel the humidity. With a nod of his head, he brought the rain down upon the land. It was barely possible to see through the sheet of water

that poured from the open sky. The only thing distinctly visible was the ever-present white shine of the moon. The space in front of Brinepaw's face became nothing but moonlight illuminated droplets.

Brinepaw squinted through the storm he had created and lumbered through the water, back to the shore. He could walk now without getting burned; the rain was doing its job in putting out at least some of the fire.

He gritted his teeth and dug his claws into the razed land, bringing more rain down from the sky. Everything was washed in the eerie glaze of the rainstorm. The flames shrunk in size and disappeared from some places, but the fire ultimately persisted. Brinepaw ignored the shrieks of terror as it descended upon his Clanmates. He squeezed his eyes shut and raced through the rain, knowing very well what he had to do next.

He went to the place where the beach sloped upwards towards camp. He remembered when he'd last been there—not too long ago. He'd been heading home after a training session with Almondstar.

Sure enough, there was a dark figure standing in the silver storm. The cat was bent into the sand with his head in his forepaws. There was a deep boom of thunder as Brinepaw pounded up to meet him. The cat raised his head and withdrew from Brinepaw, bronze eyes flashing.

"Listen!" Brinepaw gasped, "Listen to me!"

The image of himself was shaking violently, looking confused and afraid.

"You have to listen!" Brinepaw cried, "You have to push him in! Do you understand me? Brinepaw! Brinepaw! Do you *understand* me?"

Another clap of thunder.

"Burnetpaw," Brinepaw said. His searched the eyes of the cat in front of him for some sign of understanding, "You have to push

him in. It's the only way."

"What do you mean?" said the past Brinepaw. He shrunk away back onto the sand.

Brinepaw clamped his jaw frustratedly. Here was his past self, so blissfully unaware of what awaited him. Brinepaw knew that he had been a coward. He hadn't been able to do what was needed of him, but perhaps this Brinepaw was different. Maybe this time, he would have the courage to make the right choice. Brinepaw stared upon him with great intensity, and the other Brinepaw stared back.

The ground underneath their paws vibrated with the noise of more thunder. Then, abruptly, the other Brinepaw disappeared from where he lay on the sand.

"No!" cried Brinepaw, jumping forward. He pounced on nothing, ramming into the ground.

He stayed there, drenched by the very rain he had summoned. He felt that he became one with the dirt, unable to get up. Unable to go on.

For, truly, what was there left to do?

He had fought for his Clan. He had tried to protect them. But he had failed.

Now, just as he'd received it, he'd passed on his knowledge to another Brinepaw.

Brinepaw realized with great despair that this timeline was over. All he could do now was hope that the next one turned out differently.

twenty

It was beautiful and atmospheric. Brinepaw's eyes dulled as he watched the orange meld with the blue and gray. Glowing fire spread over the flat ocean plain. Blood-curdling screams drifted through the wetness of the storm and reached Brinepaw's ears. The apprentice slapped his forepaws over his ears and squeezed his eyes shut. He brought the rain down harder, harder, and harder still, praying to StarClan it would drown out the sound of his Clanmates' suffering.

But the cries of pain and distress did not cease. Brinepaw burst off from where he lay and raced over the black, hardened rock to his Clan. There they were: dark shapes bobbing on the surface of the water, driven further into the ocean by the flames that hunted them.

Brinepaw dove into the water. Underneath the waves, all was muffled and calm. But when he breached the surface, the nightmare became real again. The crackling of lightning in the sky, the rumble of the vengeful volcano... none of it had gone away. Brinepaw paddled in the water, using his abilities to propel himself faster through the sea.

There was Covestorm, at the very edge of the group. Brinepaw churned his paws, fighting the current. When at last he was at his mentor's side, he gasped exhaustedly, "Covestorm!"

Covestorm turned his head to Brinepaw and his solemn eyes flashed with love, "Brinepaw..." murmured the strong tabby, "Listen to me... you are my son. I never wanted anything but the best for you. Those four moons ago, when you first became my apprentice, I made a promise to myself."

He coughed and sputtered as a wave of salty water splashed his face.

"I promised that I would protect you. That was my only goal, my

only hope in this whole entire world. And I knew that if I succeeded... I would be happy." He blinked, eyes shining, and said with a breaking voice, "I love you so much. I'm sorry that I couldn't keep my word."

Brinepaw rose up on a wave and then dropped back down. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "No!" he cried, "Covestorm, you have nothing to be sorry for. I couldn't have asked for a better mentor."

Covestorm smiled sadly and Brinepaw felt his heart shatter. Suddenly he felt some heat against the side of his face, and he turned to see the lava pouring into the water next to him. It sizzled and turned to a cooled solid. He grunted as he threw a gigantic wave onto the freshly formed rock, battling the oncoming fire.

To Brinepaw's dismay, Covestorm grabbed the side of the black rock and pulled himself up out of the water. Brinepaw felt dread like a weight in his body. He followed his mentor onto the sharp, volcanic rock. He flopped, exasperated, onto the cooled lava.

From where he lay horizontally on the rock, Brinepaw saw that many of his Clanmates were also here. They all stood in a line close together. They faced away from him and toward the fire. Their paws were set firmly, bravely.

He recognized Bluepaw's small form and the perfectly white fur of Milkpaw. He saw Almondstar's figure further down, and there was Fawnpaw standing at Sandfire's side.

It dawned on him that some must have already burned, as this was not everyone. These were the last TideClan cats remaining. Brinepaw felt his eyes closing on their own as the world came to an end.

"I love you," he said.

He could not hear them as they died. His mind went blank and he became like a stone; unable to observe or interact with his environment.

And when he awoke from this trance, the fire was in his face. His senses slowly returned to him and there was the distant stench of cooked bodies.

Ten moons of life. The abusive father. The loving sister. The fire sprit best friend. The fluffy white she-cat with the obsessive crush. The large tabby mentor. The blind WaveClan warrior. The ghost, the war, and the gift of unimaginable power.

The lapping orange flames called to him. They danced and laughed and expressed their desire to eat him. But as he watched them wriggle and waver in front of his eyes, Brinepaw decided that he would rather die in water.

He rolled off the edge of the rock and into the sea.

He dropped like a boulder into its murky blue depths.

The ghost had been watching this tomcat for some time. He had seen the nihilism that plagued his young mind. And now the poor tom's body lay bloody and still at the base of a cliff.

"You didn't have to do that, you know," whispered the ghost.

The mottled brown tomcat attempted to raise his head, but he winced in pain. There was a sharply-odored puddle of blood draining from his wounds.

"Don't hurt yourself," said the ghost, "I'll come to you."

And he did just that. He padded up to the broken tom, his wispy paws floating along the floor of the sandy cove. The moon was waning above them, dappled and bright and pearly. He gazed down at the tom he had guarded for the past few days.

"Go away," growled the tom, "Leave me alone."

"I'm not going to do that."

"I just want it to stop. I want the visions to stop and the fear and the

dread and everything that makes me hate living so much."

Something about his words struck the ghost, though he wasn't sure why. He looked at the injured tom sadly and saw into him. He saw that same flicker of nihilism. He saw the hardship and the hopelessness and the despair.

"Just let me die. Please just let me die."

"I pity you," the ghost replied, "But I cannot let you die."

The tom pounded the rocks with his tail frustratedly, "Why not?" he cried out, and the sound of his unhappiness broke the ghost's heart. "Why am I still here? Please, please, please oh no oh no oh no oh no —"

The ghost couldn't bear to hear any more. "Quiet!" he ordered sternly, taking a step towards the tom that lay beneath him, "You cannot die just yet. You're important, Brinepaw. You're *vital*."

"For what?"

The ghost was suddenly irritated with himself. He had no idea. Frankly, he wasn't really sure what he was talking about. "I... don't know," he stammered, "I forget." He narrowed his eyes and dropped his head, thinking hard. But he still couldn't remember anything.

"You forgot?" scoffed the TideClan tom, "I can't believe this. A figment of my imagination comes to me to remind me that I'm important but has forgotten why. Incredible."

"I'm not a figment of your imagination!"

"Then what are you? A StarClan warrior?"

"No," the ghost responded, "Not yet, anyway." He knew of StarClan, but he wasn't sure why he knew of them. What was his purpose? Why was he here? It felt important...

"Right," meowed the tom sarcastically, "Let's start with your name, then. Can you tell me that, at least?"

The ghost was certain he had a name, but he couldn't remember what it was.

"You don't even know your own name."

"I'm not sure. Look, all I know is that I'm here to help you," the ghost lashed his tail and stared hard at the cresting waves, "I just wish I could remember why, or how."

It seemed that the tom had had enough. "This is all very entertaining," he grumbled, "But if you could shut up now I'd be quite appreciative. I'd like to die in peace."

The ghost looked at the apprentice. He was so *familiar*. But why? There seemed to be no real answer. But as the ghost watched his blood collect in the pockets of the rocky outcrop, he knew without a doubt what he had to do. Death was not an option for this young one. There was something that awaited him in his future... something big.

He called upon the life of the ocean to aid him. He closed his eyes softly and breathed in the salty brine. He felt power pulsating from the moon high above, pushing and pulling the tides. He brought vibrant color to the coral and the plants of the sea. His translucent paws glowed as he pulled cool water onto the beach.

The tomcat's blood was washed away and pulled into the ocean. His wounds healed with the touch of the water.

"No," the apprentice said ever so softly. There was disappointment in his big, bronze eyes.

"You will thank me," the ghost promised, and he turned to leave. He walked over the open water, where the plants and seaweed had stopped glowing. Now there was nothing but dark waves and the heaviness of a death that had not been allowed to happen.

The ghost paused on the ocean's glassy surface. He turned back to see the tom pushing himself to his feet. He could feel fate stir the air. He could see a cloud of destiny hanging over the young tom's head.

And then a name came to him. He faintly remembered having a friend that went by the same name, and now it felt it was his turn to use it.

"Call me Ghost," he told the tom, and then he vanished.

twenty-one

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit

of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned

about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored

away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw straightened up. He broke eye contact and looked away shamefully. "Go."

"W-what?"

Brinepaw lashed his tail, "Go!" he ordered, "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

"No!" shrieked Burnetpaw, "Don't do this!"

Brinepaw drew nearer. His movements were slow and onerous. But soon enough he was upon the mortal form of the spirit of the volcano. A splitting pain plagued his skull.

He met the eyes of his friend. They were shimmering with the sting of betrayal.

"Please," pleaded Burnetpaw miserably, "I enjoy life so much. Every day, I am astounded by the fact that I am still here. Every day, I am so happy to have become Burnetpaw of TideClan. For so many reasons. If I hadn't left this volcano, I wouldn't have learned about the warrior code. I wouldn't have discovered what it's like to walk and run and swim. I wouldn't have met you, Brinepaw."

Brinepaw saw the reflection of his own face in Burnetpaw's eyes. And for the first time, he saw all of the evil that was stored away inside. He saw his darkest potential. He saw the flash of Fleetwater's teeth.

"Please don't take it all away."

Brinepaw felt a force overtake him and he jerked his head into Burnetpaw's chest, toppling the apprentice over and into the pit of the volcano.

He felt the ocean moon watching him from above. He was numb as he gazed up at its shining, spherical face. It looked to be weeping with intense relief, dripping tears of milk-washed moonlight that murmured: *Well done. The world is safe*.

epilogue

As I lost the ability to be self-aware, it was the greatest relief to me. I felt myself losing concepts. First I lost my body, then I lost my likes and dislikes, then I lost some of my memories.

I faded into the broiling orange sea, the same sea I had ascended from just ten moons previous. I lost a lot of my feeling, thank StarClan, because otherwise those simmering waves would have scalded me.

With consciousness had come a myriad of other gifts. The gift of discovery, the gift of curiosity, the gift of play, and the gift of community. But those gifts were not for free...

Yes, I lost my memories, one by one, but the memory that stayed with me until my final moment of consciousness was the image of my best friend's face as he betrayed me.

What an awful world I had explored! What a truly terrible, terrible world! I had been so happy... what was happiness? I could not remember as I edged ever closer to oblivion. I could not even remember my friend's name. Well, good. He was not my friend anymore.

What was a friend? What were these words in my head? Why was I thinking? I stopped thinking so much. I lost a few more memories. I lost StarClan. I lost my principles. I lost my personality. The same image of that tom's face appeared. He had no name and no relationship to me. Then he was not made of shapes or colors. He was just an idea. But I could still somehow feel the pain.

And then I knew it was coming to an end. I had been reduced to a formless, thoughtless spirit.

It had been such an adventure.

But I was ready to stop feeling now.

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

Author's Note: Thank you so much for reading! Continue to the next part for some interesting trivia about the story.

☾ T R I V I A

1. Brinepaw was originally going to be called Bournpaw.

2. StarClan was originally going to be called SpiritClan.

3. I wrote the beginning of Chapter Ten while on a run. Seriously, I was running and typing at the same time.

4. The whole story takes place in a little over a month's time. The first few scenes, then the gathering at full moon, then the full moon again on the night of the volcano's eruption.

5. Brinepaw has severe anxiety and depression. These issues are mainly due to Fleetwater's abuse, but Brinepaw also has a natural predisposition to mental illness due to genetics. This is revealed somewhat in Chapter Fifteen when Covestorm mentions how Fleetwater must've been "very unhappy."

6. Milkpaw is a psychopath.

7. I considered having Brinepaw have a crush on Burnetpaw, but eventually I decided that they're just friends.

8. Originally, the story was going to be entirely different. Brinepaw was going to be dying for some reason or another and that was supposed to be why he got the powers. There was going to be a legend that said: when a warrior with a true heart is dying, they will be granted the power to push and pull the tides at will.

9. It was harder to write the season properly after summer passed. I tend to write whatever season I'm living in and since the whole story is just one month, it's all supposed to be during greenleaf.

10. There are three versions of Brinepaw throughout the story: Ghost, Present Brinepaw (main character), and Future Brinepaw. Well... I guess there's also Past Brinepaw in Chapter Nineteen when Present Brinepaw tries to tell him to push Burnetpaw into the

volcano. But, at another time in the story (namely Chapter Nine), this Past Brinepaw was actually Present Brinepaw and this Present Brinepaw was actually Future Brinepaw. Are you confused? Good. You should be.

11. Between Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen, I took a two-month long break because I was on a tech-free backpacking trip.

12. The themes of the story are pretty abstract: timelines, time travel, free will, consciousness, ect.

13. If you didn't get this already, Burnetpaw is a fire spirit that lives in the volcano. Both the Prologue and the Epilogue are written from his point of view.

14. Originally, the story was supposed to end at Chapter Twenty with no discussion of future timelines.

15. Chapter Twenty-one shows the repetition of events as new timelines unfold. Brinepaw makes the same decision over and over again atop the volcano: to save Burnetpaw. The last timeline in Chapter Twenty-one is where he finally breaks the cycle and pushes Burnetpaw into the volcano. Personally, I think this wouldn't happen. I don't think Brinepaw has a choice in the matter because nothing about his life changes from timeline to timeline, so it doesn't make sense that he would randomly arrive at a different decision. This is what I mean about free will being a theme of the story. I really don't think Brinepaw—or any of us for that matter—has free will. But I wrote a new timeline where he chooses to kill his friend for the greater good because I thought it would be interesting.

16. I had a document running throughout this whole process that I used to plan the pacing of the story and keep track of all the timelines. It was kind of a mess.

17. This is the second *Warriors* fan-fiction I've ever finished! I hope you enjoyed. My other fic is called *The Deputies* and it's a good read too. Shameless self-promotion. c;